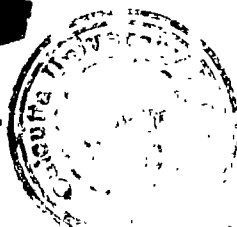


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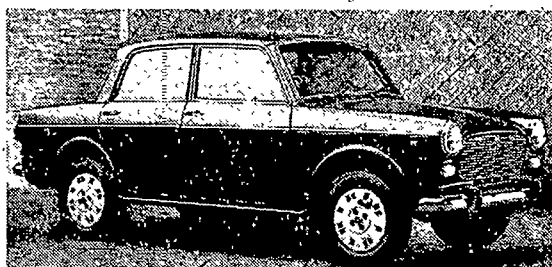
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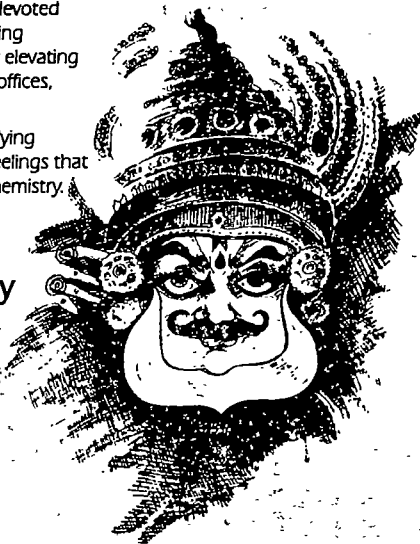
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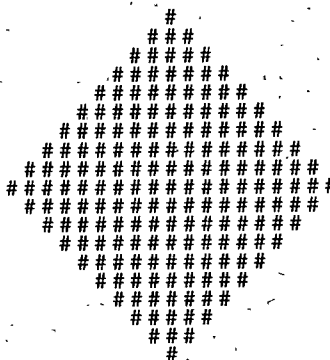
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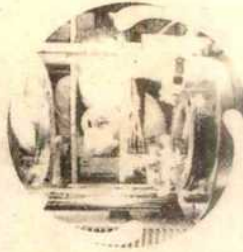
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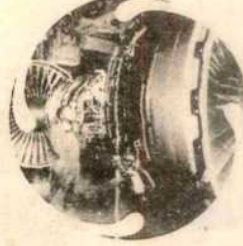
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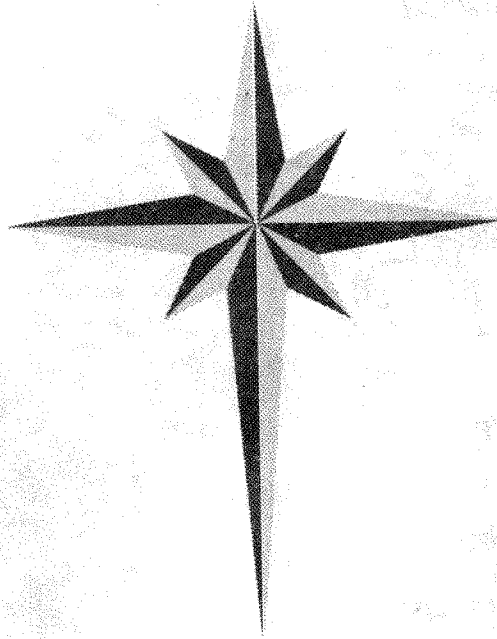
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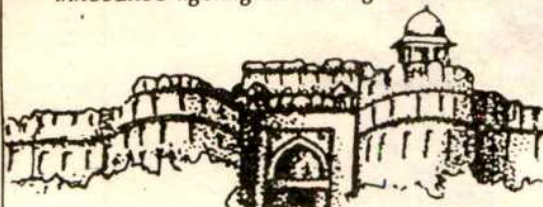
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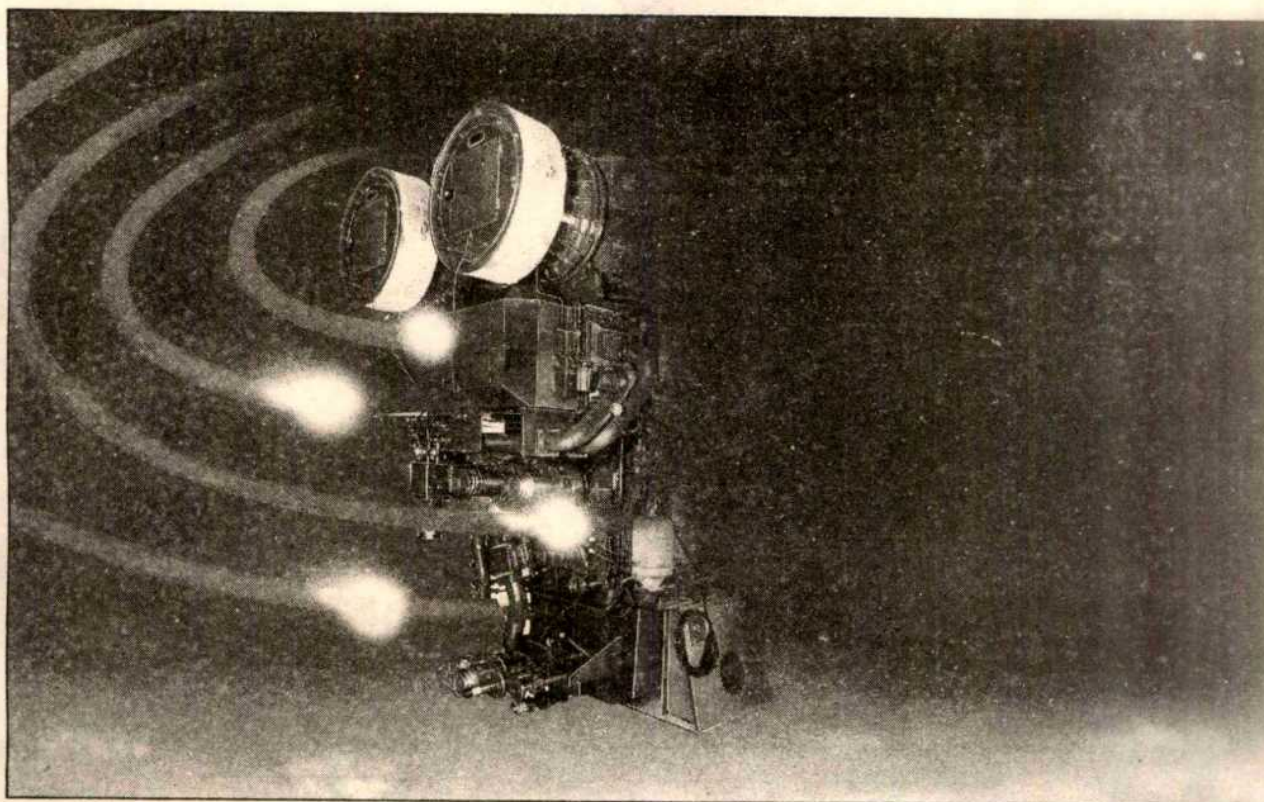
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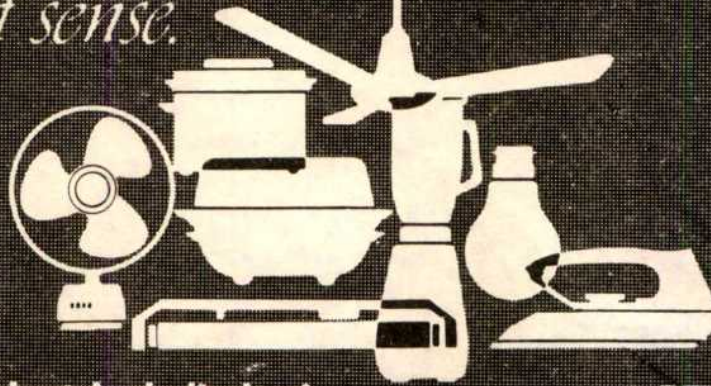
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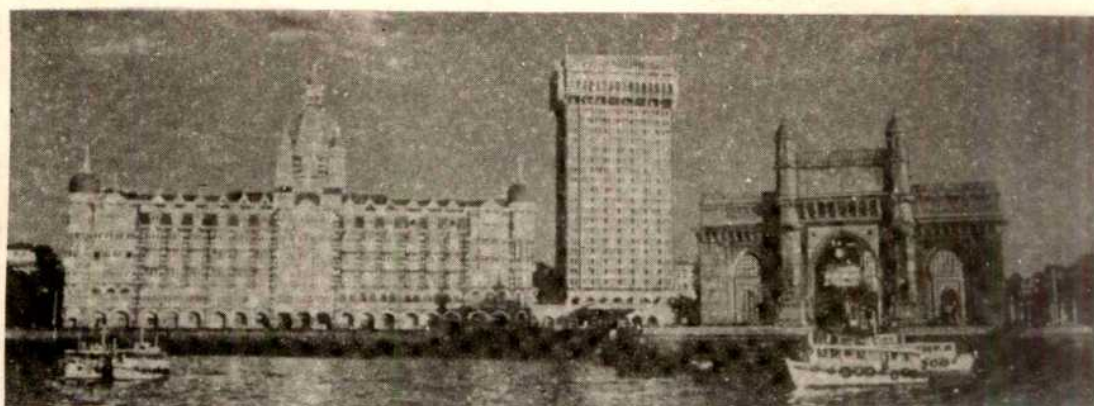
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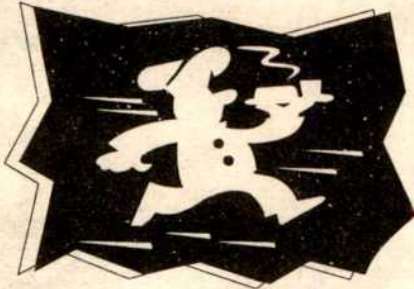
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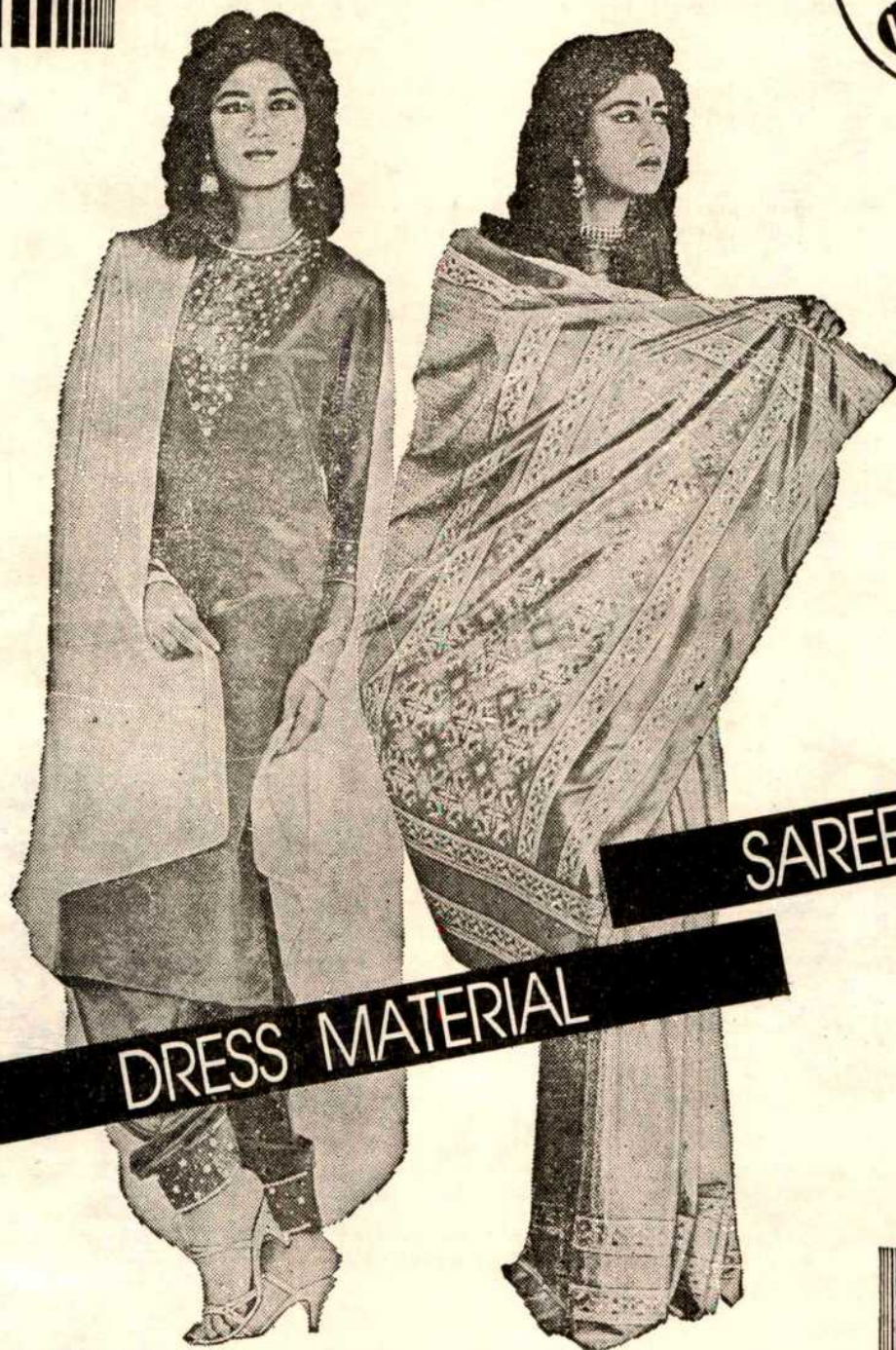
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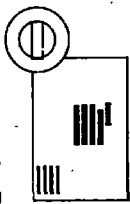
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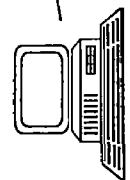
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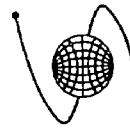
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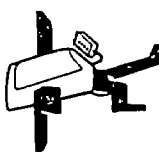
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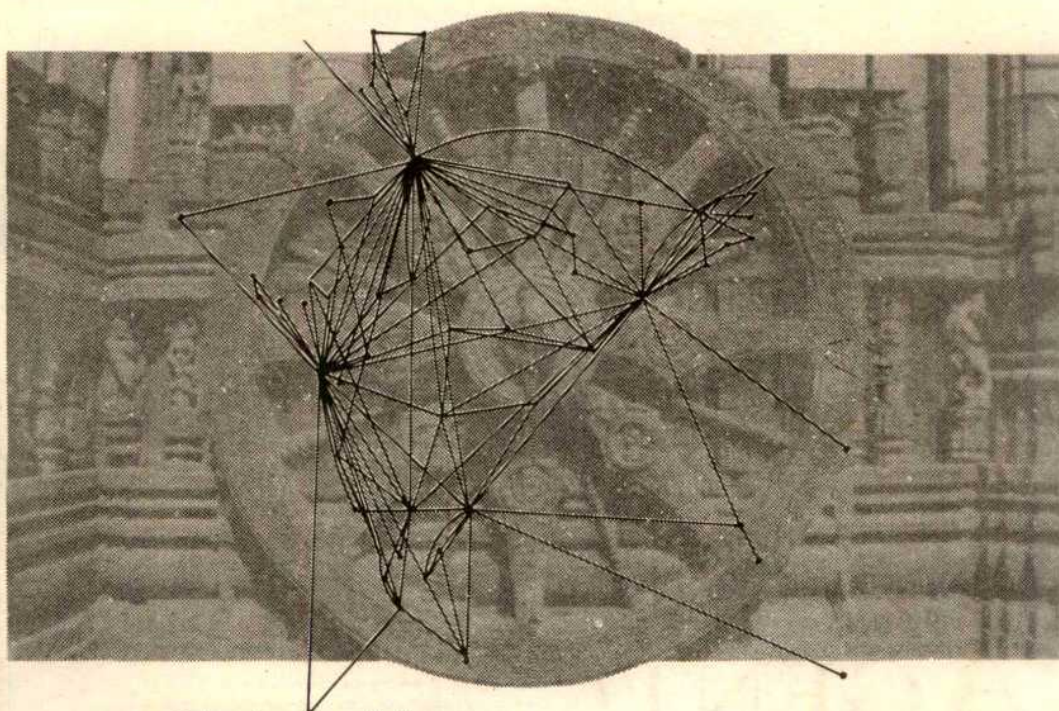
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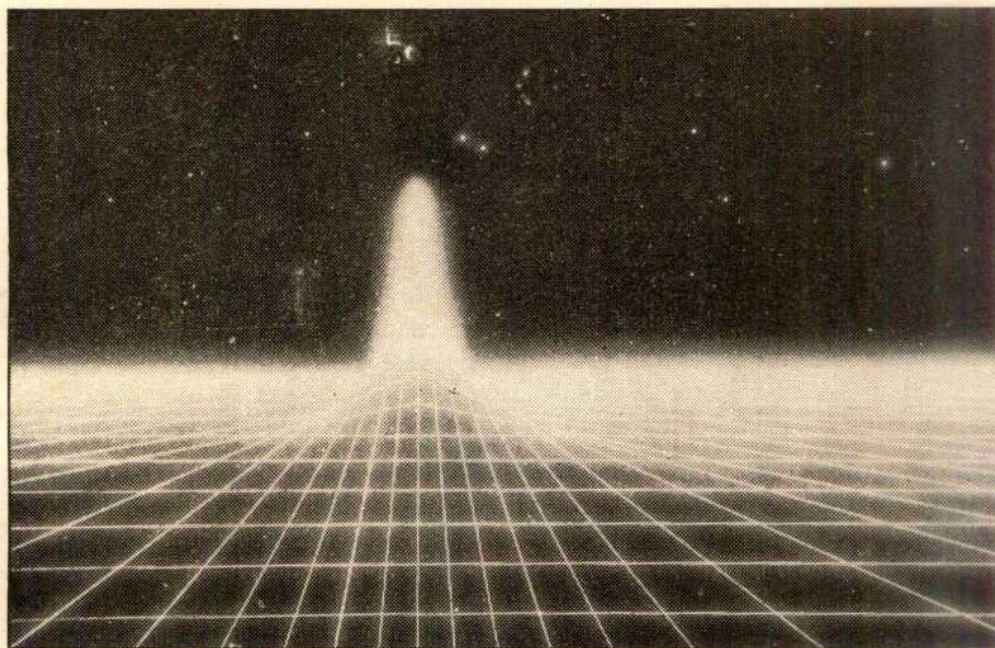
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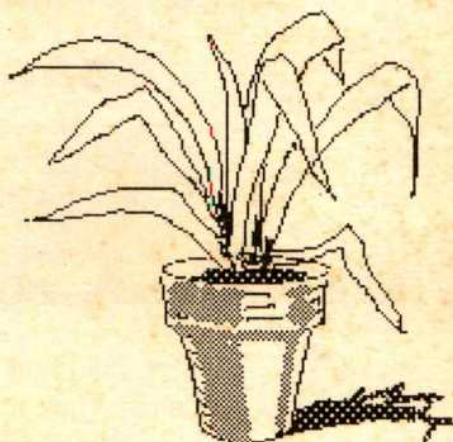
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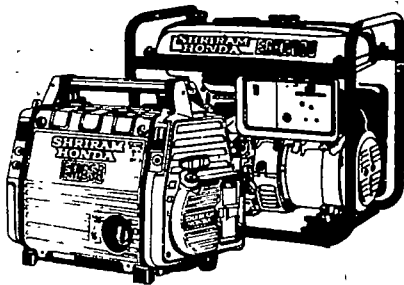
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publisher MALVIKA SINGH

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circulation N.K. PILLAI

published from F-46 Malhotra Building, Janpath, New Delhi-110001; Telephone-3316534, Fax 011-3316445, Cable Address: Seminarmag New Delhi;  
Single copy: Rs.12    Yearly Rs.125; £21; \$32;    Three year: Rs.350; £52; \$80.    Reproduction of material prohibited unless permitted.

## N E X T M O N T H : B I H A R

# 449

## INDIA 1996

a symposium

on the

year that was

### symposium participants

- 24 **INDIA: A NICE PLACE TO GET OUT OF**  
Swapna Dasgupta, Deputy Editor, 'The Indian Express'
- 26 **BASTA!**  
Omkar Goswami, Professor of Economics, Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi
- 30 **JUDGES IN A DEMOCRACY**  
Salman Khurshid, Advocate; former Minister of State for External Affairs
- 33 **THE NEW INTOLERANCE**  
Vir Sanghvi, Consulting Editor, Ananda Bazar Group of Publications
- 38 **DISORDERLY POLITICS OF A NEW ORDER**  
Harish Khare, Deputy Editor, 'The Hindu'
- 41 **THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION**  
Mahesh Rangarajan, Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi
- 45 **THREE MASTER NARRATIVES OF INDIAN POLITICS**  
Ashutosh Varshney, Associate Professor of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- 48 **HONOUR AMONG THIEVES**  
Arvind N. Das, historian and journalist with APCA, Delhi
- 50 **WATERSHED ELECTIONS**  
P. Sainath, journalist, Mumbai
- 53 **COOKING OUR GOOSE**  
Bharat Karnad, Research Professor in National Security Studies, Centre for Policy Research, Delhi
- 57 **THE YEAR OF THE BEAR**  
T.N. Ninan, Editor, 'Business Standard' and 'Business World'
- 61 **INDIAN ENTERPRISE**  
Sanjaya Baru, Editorial Page Editor, 'The Times of India'
- 65 **INDIA'S EXTERNAL SECTOR**  
Bibek Debroy, economist, Delhi
- 72 **MAY DAY, MAY DAY**  
Shiv Visvanathan, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi
- 77 **DOMESTICATING VIOLENCE**  
Anjum Katyal, Editor, Seagull Books and 'Seagull Theatre Quarterly', Calcutta
- 82 **DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY**  
Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey and Shanker Singh, activists with the Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (MKSS), Rajasthan
- 88 **EMPOWERING WOMEN**  
Srilatha Batliwala, Fellow, Women's Policy Research and Advocacy Unit, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore
- 92 **LIFE IN THE DEATH OF OUR CITIES**  
Cyrus Guzder, Chairman of Airfreight Limited and a Trustee of the Bombay Environmental Action Group
- 96 **LOCAL GEOGRAPHY**  
Kai Friese, Deputy Editor, 'The India Magazine', Delhi
- 99 **KALIYUG**  
Gautam Bhatia, architect and writer, Delhi
- 104 **INDEX**  
**COVER**  
Designed by Madhu Chowdhury of DCA

# India: a nice place to get out of

SWAPAN DASGUPTA

'Leaving was an idea you grew up with. If you were very rich India was fine, and if you were very poor you couldn't even entertain the idea, but for the middle class, success was defined in terms of leaving, because if you stayed you didn't have much of a future.'

Rohinton Mistry in The Daily Telegraph.

SOME three years or so ago, a market research organisation conducted a survey of middle class Indian attitudes. The survey covered the usual range of subjects which excite the imagination of newspaper readers—sex, relationships, politics, and so on. The results were not very surprising, but one conclusion was startling: the survey discovered that some 80 per cent of middle Indians wanted to emigrate.

I don't know whether it was this piece of information or some accurate gut feeling which prompted the *Economic Times*—one of India's most influential publications—to devote an entire page to the diaspora in its Sunday edition. The page made its debut with the unassuming slug 'Diaspora'. Within a short time, it became 'The Indian Diaspora' and then, 'The Great Indian Diaspora'. Some time in mid-1996, the ambiguities of the page heading were done away with. Readers were now confronted with a stark message: 'Join The Great Indian Diaspora'. And to drive home the point, the paper began carrying a weekly column on immigration procedures of various countries. The column is also featured in the *Navbharat Times* (a Hindi daily) and staff in both papers say that the reader interest is staggering.

I refer to these developments to illustrate a point which violates all the tenets of Indian political correctness: the growing conviction in the country's middle classes that India is a good place to get out of.

The invocation to 'Join The Great Indian Diaspora' is only one facet of this

infectious mood of despondency. All over the country, young Indians are progressively switching off from India. Whether through rarefied MNC enclaves or television channels which can be watched just as easily in New York or London, the process of emotional secessionism is in full swing and going unnoticed.

The irony is that this is happening at a time when India is making tentative moves in an outward direction. The fortress India promoted by the Nehruvian order is showing definite signs of cracking; the enterprising middle classes, despite periodic hiccups, have never had it better; and the politicians are being jolted out of their complacency by assertive judicial activism. And yet, the cream of Indian youth is disengaging itself from India, even as the nation prepares to celebrate 50 years of self-rule.

To attribute the phenomenon to rising expectations is only part of the story. As the world becomes smaller and more technologically integrated, there is a justified impatience with the tardiness of Indian development. As I write, the Dow Jones index on Wall Street is at a record high and the Bombay Sensex is at a record three-year low. People are making money in New York, London and Frankfurt; they are losing money in India. Standards of living are rising in the West; in India, the middle class, despite an outward veneer of self-confidence, is nurturing a profound sense of grievance. Every other middle class Indian has a part of his extended family who are NRIs and who have done well for themselves. No wonder there is a strong inclination—fuelled by the easy availability of information—to make comparisons and vote with the feet.

The fact that this development coincides with the gradual opening up of the economy may seem puzzling. ('My friends no longer ask me to get them any-



thing,' complained Ian Jack, the editor of *Granta*, to a magazine.) If the middle classes had combined their relative material deprivation in the Nehruvian era with a strong sense of citizenship, why is it beleaguered when lucrative opportunities have appeared on the horizon?

Politics provides a clue. The most significant development in the past five years or so is the collapse of the Congress system. This system, despite its obvious imperfections, provided the middle classes with a certain comfort level. The modern, urban Indian may not have had the requisite entrepreneurial inclination or ready availability of capital to reach the top echelons of society. But control over the bureaucracy gave it access to the levers of power. Yesterday's politician was no less unprepossessing than today's. But at least there was the bureaucracy to smoothen the rough edges and apply the balm.

**L**iberalisation has turned the system on its head. The calibrated opening up of the Indian market has involved two changes. First, Indian capitalism has been jolted out of its pampered existence. Confronted with forces who possess infinitely more capital, managerial expertise and technological sophistication, it has realised its own vulnerability. Hence the 'level playing field' demand and hence the miraculous rediscovery of *swadeshi*. Second, with the licence-permit-quota raj gradually receding into history, there is a recognition that the bureaucracy is no longer the driving force in society. Some 20 years ago, more than half my class in St Stephen's College appeared for the all-India competitive examinations and entered the bureaucracy. Today, such devoted servants of India would be in a minuscule, just as those who wanted to enter the corporate sector were then.

Affirmative action has also contributed to changing priorities. The anti-Mandal agitation of 1991 was a big hit among the middle class youth. Not because they were casteist – in fact, prior to Mandal, most of them believed caste was a social anachronism – but because additional reservations for Other Back-

ward Classes drove home the point that meritocracy will not prevail in the public sector and education. Some sociologist will be well advised to undertake research to find out the extent to which Mandalisation has eroded the commitment of the upper caste, urban male to India. He is now openly asking: is there any place for us left in India? At the very least, it has forced him to redefine his life's priorities. And these priorities in turn have propelled him into considering alternatives outside the territorial boundaries of India.

**M**andal, in a sense, has replicated on an all-India scale the predicament of the Tamil Brahmin in Tamil Nadu. There, a regime of draconian reservations coupled with strong anti-Brahmin sentiment, forced the twice born into either considering a future in accountancy, software or the law or – as happens more frequently – opting out of the state altogether. The journey from Mylapore to Manhattan established a pattern which is likely to be followed by the middle class elsewhere.

To some extent, the drift has been checked by the opportunities offered by the multinationals which flocked to India in the first flush of liberalisation. However, the newer MNCs brought with them a new work culture, which was quite different from the boxwallah traditions of the older, mainly British, MNCs. The new ethos is far more ruthless, far more competitive, far more egalitarian and far more international. Exposure to these firms have added to the growing sense of rootlessness. Contrary to prevailing left wing wisdom, MNCs are not extensions of US foreign policy. They are global players, chasing global skills and global profits. They are not anti-Indian; they look beyond the nation-state. Success in these MNCs is defined by an ability to talk an international language, have an international outlook and possess skills which are as applicable in Mumbai as London. In an India of shrinking opportunities, MNCs offer a meritocratic alternative.

The Indian exposure to the MNCs has helped change attitudes. Apart from

forcing the Indian youth to digest global trends in clothes, music and social graces, it has made them realise the importance of say, the English language. This is in sharp contrast to the dominant political ethos which seems hell bent on downgrading English and promoting a separatist Indian ethos. It has also forced them to question the deification of India's Third World status. An impatient middle class feels hamstrung and irritated by the condescension which inevitably accompanies underdevelopment. It sees little or no hope in effecting a national great leap forward; so it is content to extricate itself from the nation and look for personal advancement. Just as the Indian polity has maintained its strident anti-Americanism, civil society has embraced American values centred on personal liberty and unlimited opportunities.

The recent ITC-BAT tussle provided a small insight into changing attitudes. Two years ago, when former ITC chairman K.L.Chugh conjured up the vision of an Indian multinational which was being hounded by BAT, he was cheered by Indian shareholders. BAT had to effect a hasty retreat. It is a different story today. As Indian shareholders gauge the full extent of ITC's mismanagement, there is less willingness to give *swadeshi* another chance. Now BAT has emerged as the real saviour. And so what if it is British controlled?

**I**t is not that these attitudes have become all-pervasive or, indeed, infected the entire gamut of the middle classes. Every social group has a vanguard which anticipates the future. That section of the Indian middle class which seeks opportunities outside the cocoon of mediocrity and Third Worldism is, in that sense, the new vanguard of India. It has rejected the premises on which India has operated for the past 50 years. Unless India can accommodate their aspirations, the country will be that much the poorer.

India has already witnessed a steady brain drain. It may now be confronted with a larger, and more damaging, middle class drain.

# Basta!

OMKAR GOSWAMI

Dear Minister Chidambaram,  
When Italians are fed up with too much nonsense they say, '*Basta!*' 'Say' is an under-statement. The exclamation mark is integral to '*Basta!*' The word explodes, accompanied by remarkable expressions of disgust as well as vigorous hand movements which emphasise that 'enough is enough'. As the Indian economy reaches the end of 1996 – five and a half years after the beginning of reform – no other word can describe my sense of frustration at seeing how we are purposefully missing the bus yet again, and being so pompously self-righteous about our non-performance.

This longish public letter has a consciously negative slant with the hope that sharp and pointed critiques of our

inaction can create a wider consensus about the need for urgent and concerted action. My more realistic friends laugh at such naïveté. They say that a sense of comfort ('We are so much better than we were in 1991') and well-being ('Our foreign exchange reserves are far more than in 1991') has almost eliminated the zeal for reforms. Moreover, they argue that we are episodic people – brilliant at one-off events, but incapable of having the stamina for the long haul. According to them, our next round of reforms will not come naturally, but in response to yet another economic crisis. And we will continue moving jerkily: crisis, burst of corrective activity, slowdown, slumber, re-invention of ancient rhetoric, another crisis, and so on.

Unfortunately for India, my realist friends may well be right. Nothing in the calendar year 1996 – or, for that matter, 1995 – suggests that our policy-makers have focused on serious reforms or attempted to implement a coherent, broad-spectrum reform agenda. Some will argue that this is to be expected when we have a government with 13 disparate political parties – where the only thing that is common between Mr Ram Vilas Paswan and you is the chosen brand of fabric whitener. While such a view is certainly droll, it is hardly correct: in terms of policy inaction, there is nothing to choose between the first six months of the United Front government and the last two years of Congress rule.

**L**et me begin with the fiscal situation. Mid-year data for 1996-97 clearly emphasise cut-backs in the rates of growth of industrial production, imports and exports; and there is nothing yet to suggest that such shortfalls will be made up in the second half of the year. You know that these have serious fiscal consequences. A reduction in the rate of growth of fiscal production immediately translates to a fall in the rate of growth of excise and customs revenue. The latter source of revenue has been affected by a double-whammy: not only has it gone off-target because of a fall in the rate of growth of industrial output, but it has also suffered because of a disproportionately large curtailment of imports per se. Taken together, it would be fair to guess that the exchequer will not garner as much indirect tax it targeted for in the budget. The question is by how much?

The 1996-97 budget estimates for customs and gross excise revenue (before netting out the share of the states) are, respectively, Rs 44,435 crores and Rs 46,884 crores – implying growth rates of 25.7% and 14.4% over the revised estimates for 1995-96. A 4 per cent point fall in the rate of growth of excise revenue will lead to a gross collection of approximately Rs 45,250 crores (or a shortfall of Rs 1,634 crores). After deducting the share of the states, the shortfall to the central exchequer on account of excise

collection alone could amount to Rs 875 crores.

Going by the mid-year estimates of imports, one can safely assume a 5 per cent point cut in the growth rate. Thus, this source of revenue can shrink from the target of Rs 46,884 crores to Rs 44,500 crores – or Rs 2,384 crores. Taken together, the shortfall on account of excise and customs will probably be in the region of Rs 3,250 crores to Rs 3,500 crores at the very least.

A slow-down in industrial growth is generally accompanied by a fall in profitability. Indeed, the half yearly results of the corporate sector for 1996-97 show that profits have taken a hit – although less than what might have been expected. However, you would surely argue that the lower corporate income tax revenue from smaller profits will be offset by the new Minimum Alternative Tax on the so-called ‘zero-tax’ companies. So, I have not tried to adjust your budget estimate of corporate tax; nor have I adjusted any other tax receipts.

**R**egarding non-tax revenue, it does not need a sophist to claim that the centre will fall far short of its disinvestment target of Rs 5,000 crores. For 1995-96, Dr Manmohan Singh had estimated Rs 7,000 crores through sale of public sector equity; all he managed to garner was Rs 354 crores. I am sure that you will not be so badly embarrassed. Nevertheless, only a wildly optimistic camp follower can claim that North Block will get much more than Rs 2,500 crores. There are several reasons why you will fall short by at least 50%. First, the state of the capital market in general, and primary issues in particular, does not augur well for sale of equity. Second, the second and third instalments – if they occur at all before April 1997 – will take place in February or March; these are precisely the months when the cash starved central government sucks a huge amount of money out of the market through successive issues of gilt. Third, I do not see the Disinvestment Commission getting its act together by March 1997. I shall go into these issues later. Here, it is necessary to empha-

size that the shortfall in customs and excise revenue and in disinvestment proceeds can amount to anywhere between Rs 5,750 crores and Rs 6,000 crores.

**I**n the past, the revised estimates of expenditure (particularly non-plan) have always exceeded the budget estimates. In the first instance, let us be charitable and assume that you and your Expenditure Secretary will maintain ruthlessly tight control on central government expenditure. In such a scenario, the fiscal deficit will rise from the target of Rs 62,266 crores to Rs 66,266 crores, or around 5.4% of GDP.

However, there are strong signals that you will not be permitted to keep a lid on expenditure. For one, the populist antics of colleague, Mr Paswan, has created a precedence where employees in government departments can demand and get away with unbounded bonus. Your chief too has contributed his mite by promising to set up new military regiments and distributing new largesse in every third political barnstorming to different parts of India. The oil-pool deficit has burgeoned to an alarming level; yet, despite your coherent arguments, I don't see the United Front members endorsing another petroleum price hike. Consequently, this deficit has to be made up from somewhere. Usually, that ‘somewhere’ is the Consolidated Fund of India. Finally, while you have provided for civil service pay hikes in this budget, there is no reason to believe that the Pay Commission Report will not unleash a greater burden than what has been budgeted for.

In such a milieu, it would be realistic to assume that the expenditure estimates will go awry by at least Rs 8,000 crores. Hence, the deficit will shoot up to over Rs 74,000 crores, or 5.8% of GDP. My own view is that the deficit as a percentage of GDP will exceed 6%. This is because I am not as confident as you that real GDP will grow at 6.5% in 1996-97. I wish it did, but feel that a real growth of 6% is what we will finally achieve at the end of the day. If this is the case, then (with 7% inflation) our fiscal deficit for 1996-97

will be around 6% of GDP – off by 1 per cent point from the budget target.

So what? Why should we bother with such 'World Bank-IMF' sponsored trivia like deficit as a percentage of GDP? How does it matter if we post a 6% deficit instead of 5%? Unfortunately, it matters a lot – more so in a country which is behaving like a rudderless ship and not giving the faintest signal of concerted economic reforms. By not keeping the deficit in check and undertaking fundamental structural reforms, we will be telling the world that we have pretty much given up. But that is not all. Not keeping to budget targets debases fiscal planning, increases domestic borrowing, increases future interest burden and, hence, the size of non-plan expenditure, puts a strong upward pressure on interest rates, and retains the spectre of government crowding out private sector investment. And after three years of non-performance, this is hardly the signal we need to give to the world. The last thing one wants to hear is 'Not again!'

Can we still manage to keep the deficit under control? Notwithstanding our non-performance, I believe we can. At the heart of the matter is disinvestment, to which I now turn.

**A**fter more than five years of reform, almost all your colleagues in government and in opposition still consider it sinful to use the 'p' word. Instead, they have to couch it in terms of 'public sector reforms' and 'disinvestment'. Thus, Mr G.V. Ramakrishna is the Chairman of the Disinvestment Commission. In other countries he would have chaired a Privatisation Commission. This abhorrence towards the 'p' word has resulted in a complete lack of coherence regarding privatisation which, in turn, has adversely affected even the process of piece-meal disinvestment.

Since 1991-92, about Rs 9500 crores have been raised from the partial disinvestment through the sale of limited blocks of equity of 35 profit making public sector enterprises (PSEs). You will agree that this exercise has served only one cynical purpose – that of generating

some non-tax revenue for the central exchequer. The fundamental problem with such disinvestment is that it co-exists with government policy to hold majority shares in most of its PSEs. So long as this remains the *de facto* policy, representatives of the new private shareholders will always be in the minority on the boards of PSEs – if they are on the boards at all. In this context, outside shareholders will not be in a position to insist on enhancing efficiency, reducing overheads, eliminating multiple objectives, curtailing ministerial interference, and orienting these firms towards greater commercial accountability.

**I**n such a situation, the only shares that investors would consider worth buying are those of companies that enjoy state-sponsored monopoly rights, such as petroleum firms or Videsh Sanchar Nigam. These stocks are bought because buyers know that the government will not deregulate petroleum in the near future; and in the absence of such reform, they are assured of good dividends and capital gains. But, as any half-decent economist would correctly argue, these are precisely the firms that first need to be deregulated and made more competitive before their shares are sold to the public. Otherwise, all that the government is doing is bequeathing its share of monopoly rents to a privileged few.

The decision to retain majority ownership of PSEs – which is of Congress vintage – has not only constrained the extent of disinvestment but also dampened the auction bids for PSE shares. Bids would have been significantly higher had there been a clear commitment to dilute government holding to 26% or below in a strictly time-bound manner. This would have lent credibility to disinvestment as a strategy for better corporate governance which, in turn, would have also augmented the short-run non-tax revenue of the exchequer. This is why against an ambitious target of Rs 7,000 crores for 1995-96, all that the government got was Rs 354 crores, or 5%.

So, can we really undertake serious privatisation and disinvestment? I believe

we can, provided we think commercially. Let me share with you a strategy which I also suggested to the Disinvestment Commission. Focus only on the hotels. In the first instance, call an extraordinary general meeting of ITDC and pass a special resolution creating a new firm called Delhi Ashoka Limited. Unfortunately, because of your predecessor's mistake, the Taj Group will have to be given its pro-rated 10% stake in that company. Then sell 51% of the shares of that company on the basis of market value for Ashoka Delhi, including its land. My hotel friends tell me that transparent international bidding will fetch you at least Rs 1,300 crores for 51% of Ashoka Delhi.

Then do the same for Kanishka, Janpath, Ashoka Bangalore, Lodhi, Centaur, and others. Believe me, systematic hiving off and selling hotels alone will not only fetch you Rs 5,000 crores by March (provided your boys get their act together quickly enough), but also keep you in the gravy for the next two years. It is an exercise which will give the government much experience in genuine privatisation without any downside political risk. Thereafter, maybe the 'p' word will come out of the closet. And, if the government of a poor country cannot justify selling luxury hotels to amortise debt or meet social sector needs, then we better start learning economics and politics from the Taliban.

**A**lso, while going about selling hotels in a transparent manner, you might want to disabuse the Disinvestment Commission of their latest dogma: first restructure, then disinvest. It sounds wonderful but is a sure-shot recipe for status quo. Excluding sunset industries, there are only two types of firms: those that are poorly managed, and those that are not. The latter – such as SAIL or BHEL – are restructuring on their own, and do not need to hear this maxim from the Disinvestment Commission. The former will not restructure, irrespective of what the commission says. So, this lovely sounding adage is either redundant or irrelevant. Instead, sell majority shares

first, and then let the new controlling interest do the restructuring. Since they will put their money where their mouth is, they will restructure in ways that are beyond the grasp of hands-off bureaucrats, economists and disinterested policy-makers.

**I** realise that Indian capital markets are peculiar animals. But they follow their own dynamics which are better understood by players than by bureaucrats and politicians. You have tried to kick-start the market; yet, it has not revved up. I think your best bet would be to call maybe three to four reputable players and solicit their views. My obvious candidates would be Deepak Parikh, R.H. Patil, Uday Kotak and Shitin Desai. Have a day-long brainstorming session with them. At the end, you will get a menu of options that will genuinely jump-start the market. And you need it – if you want your disinvestment programme to work.

We all work according to our comparative advantages. As a highly trained and skilled lawyer, you have focused on a wide gamut of legal reforms: a new-look Sick Industrial Companies (Special Provisions) Act, a new take-over code, and complete re-drafting of The Companies Act and The Income Tax Act. No doubt these are essential reforms. But, they are necessary, not sufficient. And you must look beyond legal reforms to unleash a set of economic measures in the next budget to get the enthusiasm going. This is critical, for reforms are all about coherent signalling.

In your first budget, you no doubt faced many constraints – particularly the fact that there was only a month to prepare the document. Besides, everyone gave you the latitude that was justly deserved. Investors will be much more demanding the next time around, and will want to see a clear commitment to reforms – not in terms of committee reports and draft bills, but in terms of real action. It is precisely the stage that is perfectly suited for you. And you can easily come up with a command performance by announcing several measures, some of which are:

i) Quite honestly, you gave the wrong signal by raising customs duty across the board by 2 per cent points. The justification – financing infrastructure – simply did not wash. This time around, cut the peak duty to 40%. Your mandarins will probably argue against it. Over-rule them and don't allow too many case-by-case cuts, as you did the last time.

ii) Make appropriate reduction in excise duties to maintain parity with customs.

iii) Get rid of double taxation on dividends. It gives you piffling revenue anyway. And eliminating it will give a powerful signal to investors.

iv) Knock out most of the exemptions available to the corporate sector under The Income Tax Act to ensure that the corporate sector gives more or less the same financial account to the shareholders as it does to the tax collector. If you do so, then you do not need convoluted devices like Minimum Alternative Tax.

v) Subject to (iv), get rid of surcharge on corporate income tax and bring the rate down to 30%. I have not made detailed calculations. Nevertheless, I am fairly sure that a 30% tax on corporate income that is computed without taking benefit of the plethora of allowance and concessions will generate at least as much revenue as before. And it will simultaneously cut out the mess of exemptions.

**T**hese five features alone will reinstate the 'animal spirits' and create a buoyancy that will ensure adequate revenue. Besides, it will result in just the right kind of capital market environment that will allow you to disinvest public sector equity and privatise at decent prices.

This has been a peculiar letter. I started by being fed-up and ended up giving gratuitous advice. In fact the letter reflects my contradictions which are shared by many. I am fed up with inaction, fed up of being a bit player in the world, fed up of rhetoric. Yet, like many, I have faith in you – as I did in Dr Singh – to cut through the self-made knots and deliver us real progress. Please don't let us down.

Yours sincerely,  
Omkar Goswami.

# Judges in a democracy

SALMAN KHURSHID

Ronald Dworkin, Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford University, has spent a lifetime of brilliant exposition of judicial decision-making by defending it from the point of view of democracy. This is obviously a matter of grave concern for people who do not take democracy for granted or get overawed by the judicial role. At the same time they find the judicial role to be intrinsically valuable. But they justify it only to the extent it decides matters of principle and not policy. Principles are about entrenched rights which must be upheld despite the cost to society. Policy is confined to issues of maximizing benefit to society where cost obviously is a major factor. Thus preferential treatment or reservation, according to Dworkin, is a matter of policy because it promotes the object of a better and just society. On the other hand the claim to enjoy pornography, worthless as it might be, is treated as a matter of principle or a right.

The process for arriving at principles or rights is a complex one, part historical and part analytic. Judges by training and their placement are ideally equipped to discover or enunciate these. It does not matter that they make mistakes. But policy making is entirely different. It is obviously more subjective and conditioned by the game of numbers, and is more malleable and transitory by nature. Principles have greater longevity and gravitational pull. As a consequence, Constitutions such as ours have left the area of rights to courts and of policy making (which includes new legislation) to the legislature.

There has been an unending debate on the relative primacy of the legislature and the courts. In the first few decades after Independence, Parliament made sev-

eral attempts to establish its sovereignty, culminating in Indira Gandhi's aggressive postures through legislation and otherwise. An uneasy détente was reached by the 'Basic Structure' formulation. Courts as ultimate custodians of the 'Basic Structure' of the Constitution thus retained the last word. But there is still a great deal of space for parliamentary legislation, which can oust at least the routine review by judges.

What is the ultimate justification of protecting rights and thus of giving a special place to Fundamental Rights? If democracy is a game of giving preference and precedence to majority opinion, clearly judges have no role. Elections and, at best, referenda should then dictate all decisions. But democracy is rule by a majority but not necessarily for the majority alone. If a permanent or transitory majority swept away all their 'rights', democracy will not survive its first election. Fundamental rights delineate the area which is essentially immune from majoritarian opinion. Therefore people who think minority rights are an aberration or expedient appeasement of vote banks are either naive or simply opposed to democracy. Similarly, the naive belief in uniformity as a prerequisite of unity has captivated the judicial mind as well – read Justice Kuldip Singh on the Uniform Civil Code. Why should the law of marriage and divorce be any more similar than the practice of last rites? In a plural society how does one arrive at the conclusion that one way of life is innately more valuable? Inevitably the quest for uniformity leads to majoritarianism.

The real difficulties begin when policy imperatives conflict with rights. It happened in the 1960s and '70s in India in the 'property rights' matters. The issue

was seen as a dichotomy between individual rights and society's welfare. The common good prevailed and property rights were severely curtailed. This position led to a similar tilting of scales against individual liberty during the Emergency. Naturally the Supreme Court soon accepted the weakness of this thesis and attempted to redeem itself by permitting prosecution of the perpetrators of the Emergency. Tactical moves might have been made, but there was no concerted effort to find a method of resolving such conflicts. In a series of cases the court side-stepped the real issue by pronouncing that Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights were to be read harmoniously, the former giving substance to the latter. So life and liberty were reinterpreted as life with dignity. Dignity, in turn, was an inevitable womb of many more constitutional children of freedom.

**W**hile it is difficult to balance policy with principles, it faces an added problem of credibility and legitimacy when it is made by the judiciary. After all, what are the inputs? Judges in India, unlike some in the US, are not elected to their office. By tradition and discipline, they are withdrawn from society. They do not have the wherewithal to garner resources for the policies they initiate. And last, but not the least, they are not accountable. Who, indeed, will judge the judges? To add to these existing problems there is the matter of quorum. The Supreme Court is comprised of 25 + 1 (Chief Justice) judges. Constitutional benches sit as five judges and, more rarely, as seven judges. The usual quorum is of two or three. Policy is pronounced by these fragmented benches and the collective wisdom of the court is rarely, if ever, forthcoming. Two wise men laying down policy for the land might be an efficient way of running the country, but it is not democratic.

The policy/principle dichotomy is also reflected, in a sense, in the doctrine of 'separation of powers'. How important this doctrine is to institutional integrity becomes obvious in marginal or exceptional cases. The impeachment proceedings in the Lok Sabha against Supreme

Court Justice V. Ramaswamy is an example in point. Counsel for the judge argued at the Bar of the House, and Members heard in rapt attention a brilliant defense, amplified dramatically by the close circuit TV. But no one took notes and no one asked questions. Members voted according to predetermined party positions or, where they were free to do so, by general impressions on the basis of privately received information. Here was a policy making body attempting to adjudicate. Of course the procedures can be considerably improved, but the essential role cannot be changed.

**O**f the many reasons and considerations which influenced voting on the impeachment motion, one primary concern was to desist from rocking the boat of separation of powers. Much later, however, this does not seem to have worried some judges as they went galloping after corruption and maladministration. In the JMM case the Delhi High Court was not discouraged by Article 105 of the Constitution which reads: 'No Member of Parliament shall be liable to *any proceedings in any court* in respect of *anything said or any vote given* by him in Parliament' (emphasis added). What is more, the entire matter was debated in the House during the 10th Lok Sabha and voted upon. Rightly or wrongly, the matter was decided by the House. Perhaps even a subsequent Parliament would have to think hard about the propriety of reopening a decision on ethics of fellow members by their peers. But a court of law should have thought long and hard. The argument here is not that courts should turn a blind eye and deaf ear to members' corruption or that it should go unpunished. It is just that this is not the method enjoined by the Constitution and certainly not something which enhances democracy.

There is a very good reason for giving immunity on the floor of the House just as there is immunity on the bench. Unfortunately our law and our judges have overlooked the distinction, and a particularly important one, between constitutional ethics, corruption and maladministration. Besides, there is also the added

complication of discretion. Administrative lawyers will tell you that if you have the discretion to go right you also have the discretion to go wrong.

**T**he recent Supreme Court judgments in the broad spectrum of cases involving alleged corruption of public figures are in themselves startling. Although the Supreme Court's commitment to cleaning up the Aegean stables is unreservedly laudable and its zeal appreciable, it still leaves a lot of untidy edges which could cut through the fabric of our polity. There is no law for political donations in our country. Perforce all donations must therefore be unaccountable. There is a remarkably hypocritical law about elections. Politics is expensive and lucrative. It is also a profession which exposes public figures to the worst elements in society. Success is more often than not assured only by those ingredients which all civilized people should shun.

In this topsy-turvy world there was one assurance of sanity and stability – dog does not eat dog. A 'good sense and practical judgment' provided the rule of thumb by which the ruling institutions sifted the impermissible from the permissible. Occasionally the arrangement broke down or was deliberately put on hold, as in the post-Emergency period. But it was temporary and limited. What the court has done now is to fundamentally undermine the arrangement. Where will it stop? Will the entire political establishment be destroyed and the new incumbents given no workable parameters as guidance? The fact that former ministers and governors are in the dock will not stop incumbent ministers from holding huge rallies. And someone will continue to pay. All they can do is pray that no diaries be kept or found!

Judges can simply fall back on the Seshan retort: 'Change the law if you like, but so long as this is the law I shall apply it ruthlessly.' The Prevention of Corruption Act does not draw a distinction between public servant (civil servant) and public person. The former do not need to deal with money, the latter cannot move without it. Politics is a full time

profession and legitimately it pays but a pittance. The answer is not to turn India into a self-confessed nation of thieves. Public cynicism about politicians and its scant disregard for their fate is not uncommon in most democracies. Political ambulance chasers are found in every modern country.

Reformers are different from revolutionaries in one essential matter – they know that there are limits to the change a society can tolerate without collapsing. Judicial activism too cannot be impervious to this fact. The Watergate affair shows this clearly. Americans overwhelmingly condemned President Nixon for his role, but understood that the system could not withstand the shock of putting the President on trial. Others were tried and sentenced. The American Supreme Court could not have even dreamt of questioning or quashing the pardon granted to Nixon by his successor. So much for a system which is ruthless to a fault in checking the personal ethics of any aspirant to an important political office.

**W**e have a less explicit and dramatic provision in our own system – withdrawal of prosecution by the public prosecutor. Prosecutions were withdrawn against Viren Shah and George Fernandes in the Baroda dynamite case. They were withdrawn against Nandini Satpathy and Jagannath Mishra. The list is unending. Yet we have the spectacle of a former prime minister and several of his eminent and powerful ministers facing trial for charges and allegations of acts which, unsavory as they might be, cannot be described as more than dirty tricks and sharp practices of party political conflicts. That our political morality should be free of such tendencies is one matter. To drag eminent Indians to court and prison in the name of equality before law is quite another. In a democracy some failures should be left to the electorate to punish. If we are not careful, contradictory verdicts from courts and the people will only bring the system of law into disrepute.

This is not a plea for helpless surrender to the forces of corruption.

Simply because a person accused of corruption wins elections is no reason why courts should show favour or fear. But when virtually all such persons get elected, the voice of law should be worried. Perhaps it is time we explored the reasons for the electorate's scant respect for institutional verdicts or public figures. The bitter truth is that caste and religion, and indeed the ability to weave an unholy alliance of the two, plays an overwhelming role in electoral fortunes. Indeed, corruption often becomes an essential thread in that tapestry of vice.

**J**udges have been crusaders in other systems, for instance in the US and Italy, in the fight against the Mafia and organized crime. They may even have come across aberrational political nexus. But in India there is an unavoidable dependence on criminal or quasi criminal 'expertise'. It may not be drugs but it is land and government contracts. Since the State sector is enormous, state largesse and spoils make the stakes very high. The judicial tendency to address the symptoms and not the disease can be disastrous, destroying only the erring good rather than the chronic bad. From the bench and off the bench too, a dialogue is called for with the elected representatives to find an escape from the vicious circle. It will not do to plead inability due to systemic constraints. The common law mould has been broken in pursuit of justice in India's unique conditions. It can similarly be overcome for a pioneering dialogue.

Public interest litigation (PIL) was a matter of concern for Chief Justice R.S. Pathak ten years ago, when he took over from the crusading CJ, P.N. Bhagwati. Judges of the Supreme Court had then warned about PIL becoming an unruly horse and the court laid down a specific procedure. But that was when citizens were activists. Now lawyers have replaced them. From cleaning up Delhi to Miss World; inducements to MPs to discretionary quotas of house and petrol pumps – they have become master inquisitors of all they see or imagine. This is not PIL's real domain. PIL was supposed to provide access to indigent and helpless citizens who

claimed constitutional protection, negatively or positively. It could also serve as a vehicle for class actions where a large number would be affected by the decisions of the court and would practically be unable to present their case. PIL was not to be an alternative to Parliament and policy making by an elected government. To protect democracy, we need to make a Herculean effort to rid ourselves of a pervasive hypocrisy. Some steps are essential:

- (a) Establishment of a Lok Pal to assist Parliament with inquiries on maladministration, not corruption. A distinction between the two is overdue. It will provide greater accountability without oppression and destruction of reputations and honour.
- (b) A Commission Agents Act to regulate the payment of commission on government contracts and annual reports of Parliament.
- (c) An independent Director of Prosecutions with appropriate mechanisms at the district level.
- (d) Greater power at the panchayat level for ordering compensation against established police oppression.
- (e) Right to Information Act.
- (f) Constitutional amendment to relieve Parliamentary candidates from territorial constituencies and to bring them under the list system of proportionate representation.
- (g) State funding of political parties and elections.
- (h) Political Contributions Act to regulate money received by parties and individuals for political purposes.
- (i) Reorganization of the Supreme Court into a Constitutional and Appellate Court.

**E**ach one of the suggested steps would require extensive debate and deliberation. There will be a great deal of resistance from vested interests. But there might be genuine doubts as well. The judges of the Supreme Court would do well to initiate serious thinking on these critical institutional issues. These would certainly bear more fruit than sterile homilies on honesty.



# The new intolerance

VIR SANGHVI

IT'S unusual for an old painting to set off a new controversy but that is exactly what happened with M.F. Husain's nude Saraswati. In September 1996, Vichar Mimansa, a newly-launched, relatively obscure Hindi publication in Madhya Pradesh carried an article by Om Nagpal, entitled 'Husain: Butcher or Artist?'

Apparently, V.S. Vajpayee, editor of Vichar Mimansa, had just read a book called *Husain: Riding the Lightning* by art critic Dyaneshwar Nadkarni. The book contained reproductions of many of Husain's paintings and one of them was a depiction of Saraswati in the nude – a sketch dating back to 1976. The sketch

had been widely exhibited and reproduced over the 20 years since it was penned. It had later been bought by somebody and even Husain says that he does not know where the original is. What is clear, however, is that nobody found the drawing, which shows Saraswati playing the veena, at all obscene for two decades.

Until Vajpayee saw it, that is. In his Vichar Mimansa article, Om Nagpal fulminated against Husain and accused him of insulting Hindu goddesses. Nagpal's position started out as a straightforward objection to obscenity: 'Why doesn't he paint his mother and sister in this modern art style?' This was a primitive but fairly

common kind of objection to art and would not have set off any storms. But then, Nagpal got down to business: 'Why does he paint a Hindu goddess in such a disrespectful manner? Why doesn't he paint Allah?'

So, that was what it was all about.

Vichar Mimansa has only minimal impact in Madhya Pradesh, though the local branches of the Sangh Parivar did their best to whip up a frenzy. But the controversy only took off when somebody (either Bal Thackeray or one of his associates) sent a copy of the article to Pramod Navalkar, Maharashtra's minister for culture. Navalkar is a well-known 'thought' policeman in Bombay. 'Hot movies', graphic hoardings, vulgar ads, waitresses at pubs, naughty books – you name it, he bans it. So, it was no surprise when Navalkar promptly wrote a formal complaint to the Bombay police commissioner. Clearly, the police had been instructed to act swiftly, so they immediately registered a criminal case against Husain.

It was interesting that they did not charge him with obscenity. They charged him under Sections 153 A and 295 A of the Indian Penal Code, which relate to 'insulting religious beliefs', and, this was more to the point, 'promoting enmity between different religious groups'.

You could conceivably justify the charge of insulting religious sensibilities. But promoting communal enmity? The drawing had been around for 20 years. There had not been one riot, one dispute, one protest even. The first people to make it a Hindu-Muslim issue were the publishers of Vichar Mimansa. And the second were Navalkar's policemen. So, who had acted against communal amity? Husain or the protestors?

**I**t got worse. As distasteful as the controversy may have been, it was not unprecedented. There is a long and dishonourable tradition of religious intolerance in India. The Satanic Verses was banned by Delhi before anybody even realised that the book could be offensive to Muslims. The film Jesus Christ Superstar remains banned in India because a Christian group

thought it made fun of Christ. And so on. So, if the protestors had taken the limited position that Hindu sensibilities had been hurt, they would have been wrong but would not have been doing anything terribly different. The point was that these protestors wanted to go further. Their agenda was not that a Hindu goddess had been insulted. It was *that a Muslim had done it*. Hence, the loaded questions (why doesn't he paint Allah?) and the charge of promoting communal enmity.

**I**n this sense, the controversy was virtually unprecedented. It was not just a case of narrow-minded religious bigots being over-sensitive. It was a deliberate attempt to portray it as an insult to the Hindu religion by a Muslim. Rarely, if ever before, had this kind of agenda taken off in India: the Superstar movie was made by Christians and Salman Rushdie is himself a Muslim. For the first time, the forces of religious zeal had decided to take a work of art and portray it as a missile hurled in the battle between religions. The symbolism was not lost on other Hindu bigots. In Ahmedabad, Bajrang Dal activists rushed into the Husain-Doshi *goofa* and burnt or destroyed works of art worth Rs 15 million. Ten out of 28 tapestries were destroyed and 20 out of 40 paintings were ruined.

It is significant that the Bajrang Dal was not looking for paintings or tapestries that offended Hindu sensibilities. They burnt *anything*. Among the works of art destroyed were depictions of Ganesh and Hanuman that no Hindu could have objected to – and which no god-fearing Hindu would have dared burn. The point was no longer about obscenity or religious feelings. It was simply this: Husain, the Muslim, is an enemy of Hinduism and his work must be destroyed. The Bajrang Dal were happy to cast themselves as soldiers in this *dharmic jihad*.

The parallels with Ayatollah Khomeini's mad mullahs was not lost on anyone. The similarities deepened as time went on. The BJP government in Gujarat refused to arrest anyone for the damage to the *goofa* on the bizarre ground that nobody could be identified. The state was

clearly on the side of the vandals. Even the answers that Husain's enemies gave to doubting critics could have been borrowed from the demented clerics of Khomeini's Iran. Why, for instance, was Husain being attacked for painting a nude Saraswati when there were centuries of temple architecture to show that nude depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses were not unusual? Vichar Mimansa's Vajpayee had an original answer. He told the magazine Frontline: In those days it was very difficult to sculpt clothes in stone.

The surreal element appeared in other responses. The VHP's Ramesh Patel conceded the point about temple architecture but maintained that you were only allowed to show Shiv and Parvati in the nude 'because we are used to seeing them that way'. (This is, of course, complete nonsense. Nude Saraswatis are common in Indian art.) The solutions suggested by the critics had the same burn-the-book streak. The VHP wrote to Husain and asked him to destroy all his offensive paintings on Vijaydashami, a day of Saraswati worship. Navalkar generously offered to let Husain off if he apologised to Hindus. Through it all ran the same refrain: Okay, Muslim, we're going to make you pay for messing around with our deities. In the end, the controversy was not so much about offence; it was about vengeance.

**T**he current climate of intolerance raises several issues. The first is about what exactly constitutes offence. Muslims could argue in their defence that Salman Rushdie had gone further than anybody else in The Satanic Verses. You could, therefore, claim that he had crossed some invisible line and that the community believed it was important to maintain that line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. But what of the Husain controversy? Nothing new had happened except that a Hindi journalist in Bhopal had seen a 20 year old sketch. Did this justify digging up old paintings and works of art and then claim that they have been offensive for two decades except that nobody noticed earlier?

Take another recent instance. For 40 years, the Miss India contest has been an Indian institution. Over the last three years, beauty contest fever has reached new heights because of the victories of Aishwarya Rai and Sushmita Sen. Each month, there is a new contest: Super-model, Look of the Year, Miss Teen India, or whatever. Any moderately sensitive person would be dismayed by some of the contests. For instance, it was hard not to be startled by the Barbie Queen contest in Bombay last month. This featured young girls (of between 12 to 14 years) dressing up as Barbie dolls and then being judged on how doll-like they were. But the interesting point is that nobody seems to mind or even raise the traditional issues (like the commoditisation of women). Instead, beauty queens are national celebrities. Sushmita Sen was more famous than any movie star after she won her Miss Universe title.

**C**onsider now the protests that greeted the Miss World contest in Bangalore. These were only partly feminist in nature. Mainly, they were jingoistic and fundamentalist. The protestors did not mind that the contest could be seen as demeaning women. They objected because it was 'un-Indian'. Un-Indian? This, in a country where beauty contests – now passe and hopelessly down-market in the West – have become the urban middle-class art form of the 1990s!

It was interesting that the objections were the opposite of the usual feminist agenda. The girls were not seen as the victims of a male dominated society. They were in the eyes of the critics as guilty as the males who organised it. Worse still, many of them were going to appear 'half nude'. This was the anti-Indian part. Indian culture required women to be fully clothed at all times. By showing half-nude women on stage, the organisers were telling the world that Bangalore was full of sex. Why, argued one of the protestors, once the show was on world TV, Bangalore would become a centre of global sex tourism.

This strain continued till the day of the show. One set of protestors paraded

through the city carrying a nude representation of Amitabh Bachchan, whose eponymous corporation had secured the franchise for Miss World. Throughout, the emphasis was not on women's rights or the manner in which society viewed women. It was on nudity and on sex. If the Husain protestors reminded one of Iran's clerics, then this lot seemed to have borrowed their rhetoric from the Taliban. Their perfect woman was not one who had the right to choose what she wanted to do. She had to be buttoned up from head to toe and preferably, stay at home. All this nonsense about women's right to choose was un-Indian and borrowed from the decadent West.

**A**s with the Husain controversy, there was the argument of timing. The Saraswati had been around for 20 years. Why complain now? Similarly, beauty contests had been a part of Indian life for 45 years. Why get so agitated at this stage? There were other objections. If the protestors felt so strongly about beauty contests, then why were they only picketing Miss World? Even as the protests continued, Femina set about choosing next year's Miss India. In Bombay, the Barbie Queen contest and the Look of the Year show went on without a single significant protest.

Moreover, if the objection was about Indianness, then shouldn't they object to the Miss India contest which involved several hundred Indian girls in its regional elimination rounds? Why complain so strongly about Miss World where only one of the 88 contestants was an Indian? Even if the other 87 were 'acting in an un-Indian way', that should have been okay – there's no reason for Miss Greece or Miss Columbia to act in an Indian way.

Interesting, these contradictions did not seem to worry the protestors. And it is more significant that as the contest neared, the peripheral objectors disappeared. K. Nanjundaswamy – whose organisation trashes Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants because they represent the evil West – made a proforma protest before boarding a plane to the evil

West (he went to Rome). Shashikala, who had threatened to immolate herself if the contest went ahead, also did not show up. The day before the show she warned that though the police would certainly arrest her, this would not affect the protest because eleven other women would burn themselves.

In the event, the police proved terribly uncooperative. They did not arrest Shashikala and left her free to do what she wanted. She promptly took off and was not heard of on the day of the show. The eleven other prospective *satis* never turned up. Finally, only a hardcore of protestors remained. It came as no surprise to anybody who had been following the various controversies of 1996 that they came from a predictable family: the Sangh Parivar. So eventually, it was only the BJP that stood up for the Taliban's agenda.

**W**hat accounts for the present climate of intolerance? As we have seen, it is not as though the provocations have suddenly increased. Most of the protestors are complaining about issues that are neither new nor particularly shocking. Two reasons suggest themselves. The first is that for all the rhetoric about liberal democracy, India has always been only too willing to suspend other people's rights to free expression. And the second is that anybody who demands bans on works of art or well publicised events immediately becomes a celebrity in the eyes of the media.

To take the first reason: the clash between liberalism and secularism must be seen as one of the causes for the lack of respect for free speech. There are all the ridiculous instances. Why for instance should some Christian bigots be allowed to force the government to ban Jesus Christ Superstar when the movie has been screened in every Christian country without provoking a significant outcry? But there is one important instance: The Satanic Verses.

When the manuscript of the book was first sent to Penguin's Indian subsidiary, Khushwant Singh, the company's Consulting Editor, advised against pub-

lishing an Indian edition. He argued that Muslims would protest and that the government would ban the book. Although Penguin India's managing director Aweek Sarkar argued that it was worth the risk because the principle of free speech was a valuable one, the company finally decided against publishing an Indian edition.

Salman Rushdie was outraged. He was also a little naive. I sent a Sunday correspondent to ask him about the controversy that was certain to erupt when the book was published. He seemed supremely unconcerned. In a remark that would come back to haunt him he dismissed such fears: 'It is a funny view of the world to think that a book could cause riots.'

The Rushdie interview appeared the same week as a review of the book by Madhu Jain in India Today. Syed Shahabuddin read the interview and the review and decided that he was already offended. Later I asked him whether he didn't feel obliged to read the book himself to discover whether it was really offensive to Muslims. 'Not at all,' he said, 'one doesn't need to read filth to know that it is filth.' Shahabuddin wrote to the government asking for a ban on the book. At that stage, nobody in India had read *The Satanic Verses*. Nobody in the West who had access to a copy found it offensive. We only had Khushwant Singh's view – as presented to Rushdie in an interview – that Muslims would be offended. Significantly, Khushwant Singh is not a Muslim; nor is Madhu Jain or Shrabani Basu who did the Sunday interview.

**N**evertheless, all Muslim organisations demanded a ban on this 'offensive' book. When pressed they all took the Shahabuddin line that there was no point reading a book that was supposed to be offensive for fear of being offended. The demand for a ban reached Rajiv Gandhi who, as far as I know, never read *The Satanic Verses*. Nobody in the then all powerful Prime Minister's Office bothered to read the book. Despite this, they banned it.

A few months later I interviewed Rajiv Gandhi. What, I asked him, could be the justification for banning a book that nobody had read? Even the Muslims who claimed that it was offensive had not yet been offended. Rajiv's answer is instructive because it formed the basis of the secular consensus on *The Satanic Verses* ban. It didn't matter, he said, whether the book was offensive or not. What was important was that certain people might regard it as provocative enough to disturb the peace. And surely, no book was worth the loss of life that might result from its publication.

Liberals might – and in my view, should – find this view disturbing. But it became the conventional wisdom. What was the point in letting an unreadable book be published when there would be riots and people would die? Surely, the freedom of people to live was more important than Salman Rushdie's freedom of speech.

**T**here are several problems with this view. First of all, I can understand an abridgement of freedom of speech if a book is greatly offensive to those who read it, though I would still be against a ban in most cases. But to ban a book because people who would never read it might be told by political leaders to riot? Is that a good justification? Secondly, the sad truth is that there is no shortage of people who are willing to demonstrate and cause riots in India on any provocation. If you accept the principle that you will suspend individual freedoms at the slightest threat of violence then you might as well kiss your freedoms goodbye. And finally, there is the secular aspect. If it was the BJP that protested about a book that it had never read, we would have laughed at the Sangh Parivar's stupidity. But because we are conscious of the need to be fair to the Muslim minority, we tend to overcompensate when it comes to issues that might conceivably cause offense to it.

The point about secularism is, I suspect, politically incorrect but its validity is hard to dispute. Take the case of Mushir-ul-Hasan who told an interviewer

(from Sunday again) that he found the book deeply offensive but did not support a ban on freedom of speech on principle. He was assaulted at Jamia Milia and has been unable to enter the university for four years, even though he is now its vice-chancellor. Most people disapprove of what is happening to Hasan. But there is no uproar and the liberal outrage is muted. Had the Sangh Parivar behaved in this manner, I imagine that the outrage would have been widespread and extremely vocal. The *Satanic Verses* example is instructive because it demonstrates how even the liberal elite is willing to sacrifice freedom of speech without sufficient thought and on the basis of some muddled sense of secular correctness.

**W**hen the principle of freedom of expression is so easily abandoned at the slightest threat of public disturbance, it is easy to see why anybody who wants to get his name into the papers or to build up a constituency will demand a ban on anything that is media-friendly: the nude Saraswati, the Miss World contest.

If the liberal elite protests about the objections to Husain's sketch, the Sangh Parivar is not overly concerned. It merely asserts that this is one more instance of pseudo-secularism and shows how Muslims are pampered. Why should there be one law for *The Satanic Verses* and another one for Saraswati? If the ban comes through then it has successfully organised a pogrom against an uppity Muslim and pleased its membership. And if the ban doesn't come through, it has made its point about double standards.

Either way, it wins.

The Miss World protestors do not necessarily have an anti-secular agenda. But they have noted that in India no opprobrium attaches itself to anybody who seeks to curtail another person's freedom of expression. Rather, the media offers enormous publicity to the protestors and turns them into huge celebrities. Who had heard of Nanjundaswamy before he began trashing restaurants? And in just two months, Shashikala became a national figure. Similarly, Pramod Navalkar has gone from being a



local Shiv Sena leader to becoming a household name all over the country. Moreover, there is always the chance that the protestors will get what they want. Had Amitabh Bachchan not been behind the Miss World show, it is unlikely that the Karnataka and Central governments would have backed the contest so solidly. There was a strong possibility that it would have been cancelled for fear of disturbing the peace. If that had happened, Shashikala would have been a heroine to her supporters.

In all of this, one question always remains unanswered. Why are people so *ready* to take offense once they are told that they should be offended? It is not enough to say that the vast majority of Indians are uneducated and poor and therefore susceptible to emotional appeals on the basis of religion or nationalism or whatever. There is little evidence to suggest that poor people are less tolerant than the rich, and some evidence to suggest that the opposite is true. And as the nature of the Sangh Parivar's solidly middle class constituency demonstrates, education is no guarantee of liberal tolerance. Moreover, as poor and uneducated as Indians may be, this has always been so. Why then is a nude Saraswati causing offence in 1996 when it evoked no comment in 1976?

**T**here is no easy answer. One possibility is that the new intolerance is a symptom of a greater breakdown within our society. Few people would dispute that Indians are today less optimistic about the nation than they were say 30 years ago. The vanishing idealism has been accompanied by a growing gulf between communities, religions, castes and ethnic groupings. Whereas once there was pride in being Indian and a belief in the oneness of a national identity, people today tend to think of themselves in terms of smaller groupings. Caste identities, ethnic loyalties and religious affiliations have become the currency of today's politics.

Politicians seek to use these identities to divide rather than to unite. If Mahatma Gandhi said that Harijans should be proud to be the children of God,

Mayawati now says that the Dalits should punish the upper castes for centuries of injustice. The BJP slogan may be '*garv se kaho hum Hindu hai*', but the agenda is less about pride in the religion than about revenge on Muslims for a variety of 'wrongs': destroying temples, cheering Pakistan at cricket matches, causing trouble in Kashmir, having four wives, and so on. There are numerous explanations for this phenomenon. The absence of a paradigm is one. Another is that as the concept of the nation-state falls into disrepute, people return to the loyalties that preceded the emergence of that state: religious loyalties, caste loyalties, and what have you.

**W**hatever the explanation, the effect is the same – spaces are created between different groups and their differences are emphasised. In such an environment, where the polity thrives on creating conflicts between groupings and where unity is always expressed in negative terms – as unity against somebody or something – it is easy to see why society becomes less tolerant. An idealistic nation-state depends on consensus and tolerance. The faction-ridden, conflict-driven society of today requires issues on which one group can turn against another. So any issue that adds to the conflict – a sketch of a Hindu goddess by a Muslim painter, a beauty contest that is against the Indian tradition of womanhood or whatever – is seized upon by battling factions.

Thus while the nude Saraswati is still the same sketch in 1996 that it was in 1976, the society that views it has changed its perspective and its motivation. Is this too gloomy and pessimistic an explanation? I don't know. But it is hard to explain the emergence of the new intolerance in any other way. It cannot be that Indians have suddenly revised their attitudes towards art, books and beauty contests in isolation of everything else. The new intolerance is a symptom of a much deeper malaise. And until things get better at a more fundamental level, the liberal society will not regain the balance of tolerance.

# Disorderly politics of a new order

HARISH KHARE

1996 has turned out to be one of the most exciting years for the Indian polity as it attended to the twin tasks of taming the prince and keeping the kingdom intact, efficaciously and, by and large peacefully. The grand struggle among the conflicting groups over economic and societal resources continued in all its glory; a new kind of politics of accommodation is being experimented with, accompanied by a robust attempt to reconstruct the collapsed structure of accountability, but without producing – so far – a crisis of governability. Three prime ministers (including the first authentic non-Hindi speaking one), a general election, a coalition government of 13 parties, a communist home minister, and judicial custody for a number of former cabinet ministers are only some of the outward manifestations of a polity trying to change its internal order without producing any great disorder.

If the 1996 Lok Sabha election signaled the inability of the all-India political parties to sustain their all-India presence, this decline was more than compensated for by the rise of regional parties to the national stage. Thanks to the infirmities inflicted on the Congress by the uninspiring and uninspired

P.V. Narasimha Rao, the oldest political party in the country had to quietly vacate centre stage; the BJP, on its part, found itself stranded in the union government, without friends and allies and the requisite Lok Sabha MPs to enable Atal Behari Vajpayee to preside over South Bloc beyond two weeks.

Contrary to the widespread fear of money-bags working magic, the two-week BJP interlude in New Delhi produced one of the finest moments of Indian politics: not a single Lok Sabha member from the assorted non-BJP groups could be persuaded or tempted to switch loyalties. Apart from this remarkable and reassuring exhibition of wholesome political behavior in a class that has of late been suspect of possessing a purchasable morality, the BJP interlude also provided a breathtaking essay in the politics of accommodation. Driven by a desire to put a quick end to the BJP regime and by an equally intense desire to prevent P.V. Narasimha Rao from manipulating his way back to the centre-stage, 13 parties welded themselves together to produce a governing arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

1. For a view that a certain amount of power-sharing was inherent even in the old arrangement, see Arend Lijphart, 'The Puzzle of Indian Democracy:

There can be little doubt that the unnaturalness of the arrangement would sooner or later catch up with the managers of the United Front regime; nonetheless it can be argued that the very fact that such an arrangement has survived for six months should prove that it is still possible to devise antidotes to the systemic and institutional maladies. The Indian constitutional system stands renewed and energized with a democratic assertiveness. This should stand the Indian polity in good stead as predatory external forces join hands with rapacious internal forces to distract it from the unfinished agenda of creating an equitable social order.<sup>2</sup> The grand political battle over the completion of this unfinished agenda has to be juxtaposed in the larger context of three overarching themes.

**F**irst, there is a palpable loss of collective national purpose. During the five years of the Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh regime the Indian state gave up its four decade old quest for the commanding heights of the economy. Despite a change of governments in New Delhi and the presence of left parties in the United Front regime, there is no desire to aspire to that role, no clear definition of our collective ills, nor an uncluttered articulation of a national vision.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of a coherent alternative world-view, the practitioners and apologists of market forces continue to call the shots. The advantage rests with the upper middle

A Consociational Interpretation', *American Political Science Review* 90(2), June 1996.

2. Important sections of the Indian business class remain skeptical about ties with international investors. See interview with Lalit Mohan Thapar, *The Sunday Pioneer*, 3 November 1996.

3. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) remains critical of the business practices, past and present (see Prakash Karat, 'Big Business Fosters Corruption', *People's Democracy*, 10 November 1996); but critics from the left find that the communist parties are running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. 'On the one hand, you are owning that [Common Minimum] programme as common, and on the other, you are terming some part of it as anti-people and anti-national; is it not a clear case of self-contradiction? It is in this self-contradiction that the content of the CPI(M)'s political opportunism is hidden. Right from V.P. Singh to Deve Gowda to Narasimha Rao, all are talking of a consensus on the NEP and it is known to all that the basic orientation

classes and their collaborators in the critical community at home and the 'venerable' foreign investor.

Second, this re-tuning of the Indian polity to market forces at home and abroad is taking place at a time when the instruments of governance stand considerably blunted, rendering the Indian state substantially unequal to its basic task of preserving the security of the country.<sup>4</sup> The Purulia arms drop in early 1996 revealed the country's vulnerability in an increasingly dangerous world.

**M**ore than the loss of physical and organisational capabilities of state functionaries, an erosion of the governing elite's collective self-assurance and its moral authority is bound to impact the shape of Indian polity. The governing elite finally stood defrocked in the hawala scandal; the revelations in the number of cases involving P.V. Narasimha Rao portrayed a governing elite that had totally lost its moral stature and internalized cowardice.<sup>5</sup> The large body of IAS/IPS officers who manned the ramparts of the Indian state remained baffled in the context of a diffused national purpose; and, by the end of the year, the apparatchiks were visibly on tenterhooks as the judiciary sternly stated that authority must be exercised with restraint and in public interest.

Attempts to make the Indian state and its functionaries responsive and responsible by restoring the majesty of legal institutions predictably evoked

of the CMP favours this policy, whatever little changes or reforms that have been made there is precisely in order to provide a human mask to the same policy. In no case do the representatives of bourgeoisie in the United Front government represent the non-monopoly bourgeoisie against big monopoly bourgeoisie, nor has there been a split within bourgeoisie along the lines of progressive and reactionary.' See Vinod Mishra, 'Dynamic of National Political Situation and the Tactics of the Left', *Liberation*, November 1996.

4. A conference of chief secretaries in New Delhi on 20 November 1996 acknowledged 'the present negative perception of public services as apathetic, insensitive, dilatory, corrupt and discriminatory.'

5. For the politics of hawala raids, see Harish Khare, 'Rao in Clever-Clever Land', *The Hindu*, 10 April 1996; also see Harish Khare, 'The Hawala Mindset', *The Hindu*, 15 February 1996.

defiance. The most vocal protest came from the business community and its advocates in the critical community. While the country watched with fascination—and with satisfaction—as the ITC brass landed in jail, a counter-offensive came immediately. The bottom-line of the argument was that a state that chose to have laws as stern as FERA had no right to expect allegiance or respect for law. Just as Narasimha Rao's apologists quibbled with provisions of the criminal procedure code used to make the former prime minister account for his dubious camaraderie with Chandraswamy, the business community refused to see the moral or ethical issue involved in ITC's violation of the law.<sup>6</sup> They felt that a law which hinders a businessman, his whim and his self-devised code of honour, does not deserve to be respected. So powerful are the views of these 'entrepreneurs' in the decision-making process that the Union Revenue Secretary hastily assured the offended business community that FERA laws would be changed to their satisfaction.

**T**he second source of defiance came from the political class. For a while the Sukh Rams and the Ramlakhan Singh Yadavs were nonplussed as enforcement authorities crossed the political and psychological threshold and invaded their immunity zone. However, what the crooks did not realise was that public disgust at their open loot was so strong that it needed Justice J.S. Verma of the Supreme Court to merely give a nod before the whip was cracked and the

6. 'How do we evaluate the violation of laws by the Indian industrial class? It is a bad thing that they broke laws. But it would be madness to describe their achievement of building up an industrial base as socially undesirable. And they could not have built up the economy's industrial base without breaking laws.' T.K. Arun, 'Corporate Criminality', *The Economic Times*, 29 November 1996. Another view holds: 'not all violations law can be termed as frauds. If there are widespread violations of a particular law, it may be a sign that the said law has not kept up with the changing business environment.' Vijay Mehta, 'Lessons from the ITC Saga', *The Financial Express*, 16 November 1996. Also see, Sudhir Mulji, 'Exchange Control and ITC', *Business Standard*, 28 November 1996 who labels FERA laws a 'shameful piece of legislation'.



collective anger was unleashed. But the political class is unwilling to acknowledge that it needs to submit itself to the law of the land. Sheila Kaul remained unfazed despite the Supreme Court indictment; Suraj Mandal made an astounding defence of the fortune found in his bank accounts.<sup>7</sup> Attempts were also made to browbeat the judiciary; the Prime Minister openly talked against the growing culture of what he called 'political interest litigation', now being increasingly used by citizens to make politicians and bureaucrats account for their loot.<sup>8</sup>

**T**he defiance of the business community and the political class converged dramatically at the Miss World gala at Bangalore.<sup>9</sup> That controversial show brought the country face to face with the continuation of a crony capitalism that thrived on cutting corners and cozy relationships rather than on genuine entrepreneurial skills. What is more, the highest court in the country appeared to have accepted the demands and expectations of the vendors of market-forces as politically correct and socially desirable. The Amitabh Bachchan phenomenon has indeed come to symbolize what was wrong with the pre-reforms economic era and what remains wrong with the 'reformed system'.<sup>10</sup> The argument for reforms, as spelled out by Manmohan Singh, was: In the post-Independence era, the need to conserve scarce resources for high priority activities led to widespread

regulation and control of both domestic economic activity and foreign trade. As the economy grew, the administration of these controls became increasingly difficult, giving rise to complaints of inefficiency and corruption. Often these controls stifled the growth of competition, conferred unjustified levels of protection on favoured industries and gave rise to excessive profiteering without valid social justification.<sup>11</sup> As the protest over the Miss World affair demonstrated, the country is yet to make up its mind whether reforms mean continued licence for a chosen few to divert public resources to private pockets. Similarly, the Michael Jackson show in Bombay demonstrated that even the Hindutva-addicted right wing was not immune to the virus of crony entrepreneurship.

**A**s crooked entrepreneurs and the tainted political class showed no sign of submitting to the demands of fair play and the rule of law, the Indian state was hardly equal to the task of facing the defiance from the underclasses. The Kanshi Rams, the Mayawatis, the Pappu Yadavs, the Phoolan Devis pandered to their defiant constituency, aggressively demanding a place under the sun. As the middle class was unable to do anything about the Sheila Kauls and Satish Sharmas of the beautiful set, it could also do little about the Mayawatis and Pappu Yadavs either.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this context of a decline of all-India parties, an unsure governing elite and an aggressive entrepreneurial tribe, that a new politics of political accommodation and adjustment is being attempted. On one hand, the political class finds that as it can do little to take on entrenched

powerful interests discretion lies in making its peace with them. Deve Gowda and others in the United Front subscribe to this realistic, essentially a contractor-oriented view.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the compulsions of a federal coalition in the polity have introduced a healthy impulse to reach out and reclaim the periphery. The United Front government has managed to disengage itself from the old mindset on Kashmir; the Prime Minister visited the North East – a remarkable initiative, involving prime ministerial time and attention and one which ostensibly had no immediate political payoff.<sup>14</sup> Elements within the United Front have provided aid and comfort to interests which otherwise may well have remained unprotected. What needs to be noted is that despite all the turn-over in governing arrangements, the polity remained essentially peaceful. Outside of Kashmir and a few stray cases of clashes between caste groups, emotions and passions remained calm.

**T**he attempt to discipline the princely class, inspired by the judiciary, has also produced a change in tone and approach towards conflicts and adversaries. This, in turn, must be viewed as part of a larger process in evolving a ruling culture suitable to the exigencies of a coalitional era. The Indian political class is trying to adjust innovatively to a situation in which all-India organizations and appeals no longer appear to be working.

However, the new experiment in power sharing does not necessarily translate into efficacious governance. In particular, the kind of autonomy that the regional parties have come to enjoy in economic policy-making – combined

7. Suraj Mandal asserted that since he and his party represented a 'poor' area and 'oppressed tribals', they had done no wrong. See, Harish Khare, 'The Suraj Mandal Formulation,' *The Hindu*, 8 March 1996.

8. A contrary view was expressed by the Union Home Minister who noted that the 'judiciary has done a great service by exposing the corrupt...that politicians should accept a major share of blame for the current state of affairs because it is they who wield power.' A Press Information Bureau release of his speech at a seminar organised by the Indian Council of Jurists on 25 November 1996. On attempts to intimidate the judiciary, see P.N. Duda, 'Politics of Superecession', *The Hindustan Times*, 22 November 1996.

9. See Harish Khare, 'The Return of Amitabh Bachchan', *The Hindu*, 29 August 1996.

10. The so-called Indian Bank scam represents a classic example of the continuation of the old ties

among politicians, bankers and businessmen. See D. Sampathkumar and K. Ramachandran, 'The Honourable Man', *Business Line*, 9 September 1996.

11. Manmohan Singh, 'India: The Unfinished Agenda of Economic Reforms', 28th Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture, 13 November 1996. For a dissenting view, see Arun Ghosh, 'Rent Seeking and Economic Reforms', *Business Line*, 3 September 1996.

12. 'While Ms. Phoolan Devi is symbolic of a short-lived sabotaging of the law and order arrangement,

Ms. Sheila Kaul is symbolic of the unabated suborning of the very essence of the liberal spirit of the constitutional scheme of things', see Harish Khare, 'Sheila Kaul and Phoolan Devi', *The Hindu*, 24 April 1996.

13. 'For some idea of the kind of biases H.D. Deve Gowda promoted in Karnataka, see K.P. Gopinath, 'Dalits: Potential Leaders of the Peasantry?' *Voices* 1(1), 1996.

14. At the end of his 6-day visit, the Prime Minister noted: '...there is a feeling of loss of identity by various ethnic groups, and the feeling that the centre has been giving step-motherly treatment to this

with the decline of the discipline and accountability inherent in a national party — is a perfect recipe for arbitrary governance. The states' record in deficit financing remains as bad as ever.<sup>15</sup> And now with state governments being given an increased say in inviting foreign capital, there is enormous scope for regional crooks to make dubious deals with dubious international entrepreneurs.

The Indian polity is thus engaged in a tantalizing task of preventing the take-over of the Indian state by predatory forces, simultaneously ensuring that the logic of democratic egalitarians finds full expression without a total collapse of the existing order. Given the fact that the arrogance and avarice of the governing elite is confronted by a democratic insistence on responsive and responsible governance, the Indian polity will be the arena for a clash between the two in the years to come. This confrontation will be aided and abetted by the judiciary, middle class and international opinion on one hand, and a collection of old arrogant impulses and superior pretensions, on the other. Thus the liberal assumptions inherent in the constitutional scheme of things will be challenged by entrenched elites and their external patrons just as resistance can be expected from the new social classes, unwilling to submit to the etiquette and polite ways of the beautiful set. The battle over the soul of the Indian polity has started and will be fought bitterly, producing 'disorder' in an orderly manner.

region. These feelings may or may not be entirely justified. But the feeling is certainly there. It would be our endeavour to remove this feeling and to see that the basic infrastructure in this region is developed to reach the standards in the rest of the country, within a specific time-frame. I believe that India as a whole cannot progress unless every state, including the seven states of the North East region keep in step with the rest of the country.' Statement at Guwahati, 27 October 1996.

15. The state governments 'have been increasing their fiscal deficits beyond any control by delaying payments to public enterprises and by delaying payments to service their growing debt vis-a-vis the central government. The servicing of the debt from state governments to Delhi accounts for 13 percent of the central government receipts. Many of the state governments are today virtually bankrupt.' Claude Smadja 'India: Confronting Now a Strategic Choice for Growth', paper presented at the India Economic Summit, New Delhi, 27 October 1996.

# The politics of transition

MAHESH RANGARAJAN

FEW images will endure as long as the one of the gathering of 'regional leaders' at Tamil Nadu House in New Delhi on the eve of the formation of the United Front government. The faces in the picture were those of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, and his new-found allies, G.K. Moopanar and P. Chidambaram. Also present at the scene were the Telugu Desam leader and Andhra Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu and the man they chose as India's new Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda. The gathering not only sealed the fate of the short-lived BJP government but marked a new configuration of forces that aspired to rule India and shape its future.

Tamil Nadu House itself is a little way down the road from Teen Murti Bhavan, the home of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Complete with look-alikes of temple sculptures, it has little in common with the Lutyens-style architecture of the latter building. Constructed by the state government in the national capital, it became the stage for the gathering of regional leaders, each with their own specific agendas. The DMK represents one of India's oldest regional parties while the Telugu Desam is a relative newcomer. The Karnataka Janata Dal, in turn, unlike its counterparts in much of northern India, is the stronghold of dominant landed castes and some of the country's most educated and prosperous Muslim communities. The two breakaway Congressmen represented the failure of the post-Rajiv party to retain loyalties of its members in a region known for sub-national assertiveness. As for the five men themselves, not one was of the former priestly class, and all

hailed from south of the Vindhyas. They upstaged not only the Janata Dal and other components of the National and Left Fronts, but also marked the ascendancy of a new kind of leadership. Rooted in the regions, unwilling to kowtow to powerful national parties like the Congress or the BJP, these are elements who will play a critical role in the days and years ahead.

The occasion itself left no one in doubt of the enormity of the transition, even if it pointed to the incomplete nature of the change. True, it is easier to define the coalition in terms of what it is not than what it is. But one thing is clear: regional political parties are in the driver's seat. And their social complexion is such as to reflect more clearly than ever before the coming of age of the cultivating castes in Indian politics. In the past, both in 1977 and 1989, the leadership of the coalition hinged on the outcome of the struggle inside the Janata *parivar*. Even the objection to Hindutva should not merely be seen in terms of the communal versus secular divide but as a rejection of a notion of India as a monolithic society held together by an overbearing Centre.

**T**he divide in India on the eve of a new millennium is not simply in terms of the views one has of Mandal and Mandir. The latter has few adherents outside the ranks of the Sangh Parivar. If anything, the polity is now seeing the full play of a welter of identities which cannot be easily contained within the bounds of an idiom as narrow as that of Hindutva. As for Mandal, the politics of representation built around, but by no means limited to affirmative action, is here to stay. The roots of both these changes – the increasingly plural nature of society and the assertion of newly politicised groups lie in the past. The outlines of the future are not always clear but the present offers some scope for a critical assessment of the balance of forces.

*The Congress:* For the second time in the 1990s, India has been governed by a ministry which had a majority of its seats from the four southern states, with minimal representation from the Gangetic plain. But this time, as the centrist and

leftist parties undercut the Congress in the south, they provided the nucleus of a new configuration of forces at the Union. Unlike in 1977 and 1989, the Congress failed to retain a hold in its southern bastions. True, the coalition itself is directly reliant on Congress for its mere survival, but there has still been a momentous shift in terms of a broad polarisation of political forces that are against or for Hindutva. The fact that the Congress ceded the role of holding together the anti-Hindutva combination to other groups was an admission of the limits of its power.

**D**ue to the uneven nature of the process in different parts of the country, it is difficult to generalise on the reasons for the collapse of the Congress as the dominant force in the system. It is still, as in the past, the largest single entity in the country in terms of its share of popular support. But there are clear signs of the old order giving way. Though long able to bridge the gap between regions by assimilating various group loyalties, the party is now going through a serious and protracted crisis. Even in Marathi speaking western India, where it managed to lead in the transition to a Maratha led polity, its social base has withered and shrunk. The ability of the Third Front to eat into its Dalit and Muslim base may have let in the BJP and Shiv Sena, but it has much more ominous consequences for the Congress in the long run. Across India, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 undermined the confidence of minorities and liberal elements across the board in the party's ability to preserve the peace.

Further, the 'poor', an omnibus category, seem to have moved away more decisively, influenced in no small measure by the steep rise in grain prices in the last four years. The ability of the two Telugu Desam parties and the leftists to upstage the Congress in Andhra Pradesh is significant. It is a reflection of the weakening links of the Congress to its earlier loyal base of under-privileged groups in rural areas. The collapse of the broad coalition in western and southern India,

even in regions which it had managed to hold onto in the past, is a sign of crisis. To make matters worse, the rhetoric of guarding the national interest, so successfully appropriated in the 1984 elections, is of little use now. There is no point trying to paint Chandrababu Naidu or even Karunanidhi as secessionist or in anti-patriotic colours. The attempt will not wash. Conversely, such region-centred political groupings feel confident enough to propose a different kind of relationship at the federal level from the one we have seen in the past.

Instead of being the premier political formation in the country that sought to subsume various currents of opinion within its own ranks, the Congress is now forced to play a subordinate role, as for instance in U.P. The issue is not merely one of tactics. The party lacks the wherewithal to stall the BJP on its own. It has no option but to find a new place in the company of parties and groups it has long berated as being incapable of governance. This situation has not arisen all of a sudden and the Congress in U.P. has been playing the role of supportive secondary force for some time. But the consequences of such a choice are yet to sink in.

**I**n western and central India, the party is still the largest oppositional force to Hindutva. But the problem is that in much of southern India it confronts the very parties it has to collaborate with at the Union government level. As for now, it has little option but to pursue the course of forging links with the Mandal classes and the Dalits. It has tried to do both, the first through support to the United Front and the latter through alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party. Reduced to a marginal presence in the Gangetic plains, it is not in a position, as in the past, to upset the applecart and return to power with a fresh mandate. But such policies stir a deep unease in its ranks. After all, this is a party used to being its own master. How will it work in the long run with a coalition that it does not dominate? Whatever the response to that question, it will remain a dilemma for future leaders of the country's oldest party.



*Politics and culture:* Even this denouement has only become possible due to the transformation of the political scene in northern India in the wake of the Mandal Report in 1990. The assertion of the Other Backward Classes is by no means a new phenomenon, but the pace and kind of transformation has, if anything, been markedly uneven in different regions. Karunanidhi himself symbolises one extreme end of the spectrum. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu is the legatee of the decades-long social reform movement that replaced Brahmin political hegemony with a broad non-Brahmin coalition. At the other end of the spectrum, such a process has been far from easy in the Gangetic plain where the *savarna* Hindus themselves include former warrior and mercantile groups and cannot be as easily isolated as their counterparts in the south were.

**Y**et, this social churning does partly explain the inability of the Hindutva forces to decisively rout their Mandalite opponents in either U.P. or Bihar. States like Andhra or Karnataka, where political power lies in the hands of powerful cultivating castes like the Kammas or the Vokkaligas, may not be quite as militant as the Dravidian movement of old. But there is little doubt that these regionally rooted groups have little in common with the Hindutva agenda of creating a strong centre and a revived sense of hierarchy. Once the Congress tried to play the Hindutva card, as it did through the eighties, it opened the way for the defection of the upper castes to the BJP and of the minorities to pluralist parties. In the past, the politics of consensus was built around the domination of society by a narrow stratum that held onto power on a tripod of Muslim, Dalit and upper caste support; this has now come apart.

In U.P. particularly, the rise to power of the OBCs has been accompanied, and of late paralleled, by autonomous political mobilisation by the Dalit led Bahujan Samaj Party. Breaking away from the Congress camp over the last few years, the Dalits of the state have been more successful in carving out a separate

leadership than in Maharashtra. If anything, a single-minded drive for political power has seen serious ruptures between the OBC led and Dalit led fronts. Yet, the upshot of all this is that the politics of caste loyalties has prevented the forces of Hindutva from stepping into the shoes of the Congress. Unable either to fully incorporate the aspirations of the former lower castes or to simply be defenders of upper caste interests (for reasons of electoral survival), the BJP is clearly on the back-foot. Any new hegemony in the Gangetic belt will be of the newly politicised groups, not of those who held sway in the old order.

**Y**et, the contrasts are striking. In western and southern India, the likes of Ambedkar and Phule before him, of Naicker and the Justice Party prior to him, gave the movement of those at the lower end of the pyramid a sense of cultural pride before they gained access to political power. The cultural transformation was well under way before office came fully within grasp. True, the groups somewhere in the middle gained the most, such as the Marathas. But they put an end to the old pattern of power. In Hindi-speaking India, the Congress managed to retain Dalit political following for much longer. However, there was no space in its ranks for the likes of even a Kamaraj Nadar. Eventually, OBC assertion had to come from outside its ranks.

However, in the absence of a long history of cultural self-assertion, the new leadership is not quite as skilled in the use of statecraft as its southern counterparts. It still relies on a bureaucracy that continues to be dominated by the upper castes and is hostile to it at every turn. Given more than four decades of reservation, the Dalits have a measure of representation in the state sector, but the OBCs are still only a minor presence. This itself is a major contrast with southern India. Much of the instability that is associated with the regimes of the likes of Laloo or Mulayam Singh Yadav arises from this disjuncture between political and bureaucratic power. It is also likely to make the task of crafting a new hegemony in the Gangetic belt

a much more complex and arduous exercise than elsewhere in the country.

The very fact that the race for employment in government remains so intense in the north is itself reason for concern. With government investment declining, it will not be easy to gain in terms of central allocation to industry. The poor state of infrastructure and declining levels of skills will also make it difficult to attract investment. Hence, the attempt by each holder of public office to accumulate as much as they can via 'corruption'. Such tendencies exist in all parts of India, but in Bihar and U.P. they have become a way of life for a huge section of the political and official classes. The process of wealth creation is itself apt to be pursued by cornering political power and government contracts, grabbing land and distributing largesse. In the new reform oriented order, this cannot but widen the disparity between the north and the more prosperous regions. Add to this the potential for communal conflict and the region looks by far the most vulnerable to prolonged turmoil.

**T**he disparities are even more marked in terms of the welfare net of the administration. Only a small fraction of the people in the two northern states have any access to subsidised grain. In the south it is very different. Kerala is best known for its record in terms of human development indices. Tamil Nadu has shown a marked improvement over the last two decades, especially with its mid-day meal programme in schools. Both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have variants of grain provisioning below the market rate for the poor. Such subsidies are seen not merely in terms of hand-outs, but as integral to the legitimacy of political power. The spin-off effects in the case of Tamil Nadu have been clear in terms of female literacy and improved child health.

What is significant is that the parameters of the debates have shifted. In place of a neo-monetarist obsession with efficiency, there is an acknowledgment of the importance of providing a safety net for those who lack purchasing power to obtain enough food from the

market-place. In fact, the ability of state governments to intervene effectively in the economy, so clearly evident in such programmes, has been a factor in attracting investment. In each of the four southern states, a measure of devolution has also given local bodies a greater role in self-government than in the past. Karnataka is the best known case and the process, aborted under the Congress, has been revived by the Janata Dal.

*Communists and communalists:*

All of this may not amount to much if seen from a conventional radical viewpoint. After all, regional parties, though eager to take the edge off deprivation and willing to devolve power, are hardly committed to a transition to socialism. Yet, the Left Front, which forms a group no regime in Delhi can afford to ignore and the UF cannot even do without, is reluctant to face realities. Its own regimes in the states, most notably in West Bengal, have in fact often anticipated many of the reformist projects of its allies in other states. But the commitment to the Nehruvian economic model in terms of its basic premises and the genuine concern that liberalisation may harm the interests of the under-class, prevents the leftists from playing a larger role in governance. The CPI(M) in particular, is over-articulate in the advocacy of an economic programme that no regime in power in New Delhi can implement. The tactical necessity of aligning with the centrist parties cannot disguise the deep unease within Marxist ranks.

If the radical parties are unclear of their precise role in a wider coalition, the plight of the Hindutva-vadis is both better and worse. It is better as the BJP has emerged as the single largest entity after the Congress. Though the party was unable to attract enough allies to form a stable government, it could be ousted only after the Congress and the United Front joined forces.

The problem facing the BJP is more complex: its very proximity to power requires it to project a sober and disciplined image. Yet, it is strident anti-Muslim baiting that enabled major electoral gains, as in Maharashtra. Again, its image of incor-

ruptibility which had paid rich dividends in the past, is now fading, as its cadres and leaders join the ranks of others accused of corruption or the abuse of political office for private gain. More ominously, in regions where it has become the largest force, the fissures in society are mirrored within the ranks of the party. The caste question was supposed to dissolve into insignificance once all leaders had been inculcated with the culture of the parivar. However, this has not helped retain the loyalties of the upwardly mobile kshatriyas of Gujarat who chafed at Patel hegemony of the party. In Uttar Pradesh, the organisation is unable to decide whether to completely Mandalise itself.

In a sense, there are two futures before the BJP. It can attempt to be a replica of the Congress: but this may only reproduce all the ills of the former without the saving grace of a consensual politics that lasts, if only for a time. Or else it can emulate the Janata Dal: become a platform for the newly assertive social groups who see their own interest in power as congruent with the end of upper caste domination of the polity.

But this will simply not do. The BJP, were it to be a carbon copy of the Congress, would lose its distinctive appeal. Similarly, the process of Mandalisation cannot go beyond a point because the parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, is unlikely to ever wholeheartedly endorse it. After all, the creation of a unified Hindu bloc requires the abolition of caste identities.

*Towards a new order:* The politics of affirmative action and devolution of power to the regions will entail the creation of a new political order. Or rather, it will carry forward a process that is already under way. The results and consequences cannot possibly be uniform. In western India, the process of wealth creation is to some degree already insulated from the political process, but it is still unclear if any populist or liberal alternative will emerge to confront the dominant Hindutva forces. The south appears to have settled into a pattern in which parties alternate in holding the reins of power.

The economic ascendancy of the region, except for Kerala, will probably be the most enduring feature of the coming period. This, however, hinges on the continuance of coalitional regimes in New Delhi. Given the long history of maritime trade and the development of various instruments of credit available to regional rulers, few of the satraps are squeamish about the play of market forces. The leftist regimes will probably fall in line despite protestations to the contrary, in their bastions in the south, west and the east. That still leaves out a vast part of India.

Without doubt, it is the north that will retain for some time to come the maximum explosive potential. Here the disparities of caste and class are perhaps at their worst, the mediating ability of the state is at its lowest ebb, its civilising force least evident and its brutal face all the more stark.

In a sense, the outcome of this struggle will be critical for more than one reason. Much of India's flexibility as a polity is derived from the capacity of the political structure to accommodate various identities. In the recent past, the limits of the process have been evident in Jammu and Kashmir, and in Punjab. Much of the North East presents an even more grim picture. The dominant order has hardly dealt with any of these issues in a meaningful way. In the main, and this is true both of the bureaucracy and the bulk of the political class, the issue has been seen primarily in terms of a narrow equation – expand the power of the Centre and hold down the regions. This was the main premise of the Congress in the past and has now been reified to the level of an ideology by the BJP.

In the decades ahead, the political class will have to go beyond the politics of representation to facing such issues. It also has to ask how the process of wealth creation can provide the basic minimum for those who lack purchasing power. Significant as that gathering in Tamil Nadu House was last May, it is only a sign of the times. The real challenges lie ahead. The future is one of both danger and hope.

# Three master narratives of Indian politics

ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

THAT India is in the throes of a profound political, social and economic transformation has been clear for some time. The elections of 1996 have further underlined the emerging long-run trends. If we look back and reflect, it will be clear how fundamental the basic issues are.

Four foundations of post-independence India have been altered, or fundamentally challenged, by the politics of recent years. First, the political mobilization of lower castes is undermining, perhaps decisively, the traditional caste hierarchy of a social order which has dominated for centuries the lives of most Hindus. Second, the secular political order has been mightily challenged by Hindu nationalism. The challenge, however, is beginning to fizzle out, as Hindu nationalism is increasingly being taken over by the realities of Indian politics requiring a serious dilution of ideological purity and the need for broad coalition-making. Third, the Fabian socialist and inward-looking core of the economic system is dying out, giving way to a deepening market orientation and international openness.

And finally, the end of the cold war has rendered nonalignment, the lynchpin of India's foreign policy, irrelevant. No new foreign policy doctrine has emerged to guide India in a confused international system. The country has come closer to the U.S. but has not yet embraced it passionately, nor is it likely to. It is looking for 'a mature friendship', that emphasizes what is common between the two nations and also live with some inevitable differences that divide them.

Few political systems change their basic principles without political struggles and turbulence. In extreme cases, not just the system but the nation breaks down. The former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are, of course, the most recent cases in point.

It is, therefore, not surprising that as a consequence of the transformations underway, India has seen a great deal of violence and turbulence in the last 10 years. More noteworthy, and not generally emphasized, are the restorative trends. India's various transformations are taking place within a democratic framework, the only foundation of post-independence India that has not only remained unchallenged but has undoubtedly become sturdier of late.

Consider the latest evidence for the last claim. The largest ever survey of political beliefs and preferences of Indian citizens conducted in 1996 found that: (i) over two-thirds of respondents rejected governance without political parties; (ii) about 60% were convinced that voting made a difference, a belief the poor held more strongly than the rich; (iii) voter turnout among the poor and in the countryside was higher than the national average; (iv) over 75% of respondents rejected the claim that only the educated should vote, though illiterates comprised only 42% of the sample; and (v) finally, respondents said that they trusted the Election Commission and the courts on the one hand and politicians on the other more than they did bureaucrats and policemen. Politicians, in other words, have become a way to counter the unresponsiveness of the bureaucracy and police, and if politicians become corrupt and violate public trust, the Election Commission and courts can force them to behave!

To sum up, compared to its past, India today is less statist, less secular, less Moscow-friendly, less dominated by the upper castes, and more democratic. With the exception of lesser secularism, all these trends are likely to deepen in the coming 15-20 years. Secularism is unlikely to collapse not because the Congress party can



revive its past glory, but because Hindu nationalists have a new and vigorous political adversary: India's lower caste politicians and their platform of social justice. The lower caste politicians are divided, but there appears to be an upper threshold in their internal battles. The internal divisions have not led to a wholehearted embrace of the BJP for the sake of power and to settle internal conflicts. That the BJP and BSP could not come together after the U.P. elections should indicate that ideology has become a serious element in Indian politics. The non-ideological, purely power-based coalition-making of the 1970s and 1980s is not over, but it appears to be in serious decline.

**T**he upper bounds of the conflict among lower caste politicians are defined by a simple truth: that lower caste politics and Hindu nationalism are fundamentally opposed to each other. Whereas caste politics is intra-religious, Hindu nationalism is inter-religious. The former, emphasizing the mobilization of lower castes on grounds of social justice against the upper castes inevitably splits Hindu society; contrariwise, Hindu nationalism seeks to build inter-caste unity within Hinduism, wishing caste distinctions were displaced by a Hindu-Muslim cleavage. The rise of one means the loss of the other. Lower caste, not Congress, politics now constitutes the biggest stumbling block for the ideological and political march of Hindu nationalism. The Congress will not die. Machine parties, first of all, rarely do, for they have a great capacity to reinvent the machine of patronage. Second, and more importantly, there is a huge, eclectic middle in Indian politics, which does not want ideologically driven politics and sees governmental stability as the main goal of political life. The Congress continues to be appealing to the eclectic middle.

The rise of lower caste-based politics to national visibility and power essentially represents a South Indianization of Indian politics. In the first decades of this century, such politics was pioneered in the Madras Presidency by the Justice party, and in what is Kerala today, by Sri

Narayan Guru, who led the self-respect movement for the Ezhavas. Indeed, an unambiguous and ideological extension of the South to the North allows reflection on a century-long perspective on the biggest driving forces of Indian politics.

**A**s we look back upon a whole century, we will notice that Indian politics has been dominated by what may be called three 'master narratives'. By 'master narratives', I mean the major organizing devices for mass politics, or the leading political idioms that mobilize the masses. Master narratives tell stories that make the critical issues in politics intelligible to the masses. They represent ways of putting together popular social coalitions so that politics can be altered and/or political power won.

The three master narratives are secular nationalism, religious nationalism, and caste as a basis of social justice. The power of the first narrative – secular nationalism – has declined, and that of the caste narrative has increased in recent years. Religious nationalism has also gone through a revival since the '80s. Despite these changes, all three narratives have, more than any other attempts at constructing politics, repeatedly generated remarkable passions in politics. The linguistic regionalism of the '50s was satiated by the linguistic reorganization of Indian federalism; and the narrative of Bharat versus India, which appeared to enlarge in the '80s, was eclipsed by the rise of Hindu nationalism and caste tensions in the late '90s. Finally, class as a basis of mass politics could never move beyond Kerala and West Bengal. In a century-long perspective – class, urban-rural and linguistic distinctions appear to be a minor drama in the theatre of Indian politics.

The first master narrative, secular nationalism, is India's 'official ideology' or what Benedict Anderson would call 'official nationalism'. It guided the national movement and was legitimated by the country's Constitution after independence. This narrative evokes the image of nation as a family. According to this narrative, all religions (as well as lan-

guages and ethnic groups) have an equal place in the national family and as a principle, none will dominate the functioning of the state. It emphasizes that one's religious faith would not determine citizenship in the country and all the rights that go with it; birth in India is the sole legal criterion. In electoral politics, the Congress party has been the prime representative of this narrative in this century. Most, though not all, political parties in India subscribe to this view of the nation, but they also claim that the Congress has not quite lived up to the narrative, treating, despite legal equality, some castes and religions more indulgently than others.

**R**eligious nationalism, the second master narrative, has primarily taken two forms: Muslim and Hindu. Muslim nationalism emerged and dominated the first half of the century. It led to the birth of Pakistan in 1947. The argument for Pakistan was simply that Hindus and Muslims were not two different religious communities, but two separate nations. Hindu nationalism is the mirror image of Muslim nationalism. Hinduism, according to the Hindu nationalist narrative, gives India its distinctive national identity, and other religions must assimilate to the Hindu centre. What attracts the Hindu nationalist – the presumption about the Hindu centre of India – is precisely what repelled the Muslim nationalist. Whether or not Hindus can enjoy legal primacy, they must, according to Hindu nationalists, have the cultural and political primacy in shaping India's destiny. The aim of the Hindu nationalist narrative is not only to emphasize the centrality of Hinduism to India, but also to build Hindu unity. The Hindus, after all, are a religious majority only in a manner of speaking. They are divided internally by multiple caste cleavages.

As a conception of the nation, religious nationalism has been the chief competitor of secular nationalism in this century. Muslim nationalism was the *bête noire* of secular nationalists during the national movement. Once Muslim nationalists left India for Pakistan, Hindu nationalists became the principal ideological

adversary. After 1947, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been principal patrons of religious nationalism in politics, initially supported by the Hindu Mahasabha and recently by the Shiv Sena.

**T**he third master narrative emphasizes lower caste unity, incorporating the OBCs and/or the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Rather than nation and placement of religious or linguistic groups therein, the caste narrative speaks of the deeply hierarchical and unjust nature of the Hindu social order where upper castes have traditionally enjoyed ritualistic privileges and superior social rank, while lower castes suffer the disadvantages of an 'unclean' status. An egalitarian restructuring of the Hindu social order is the chief goal of the caste narrative: caste should not determine whether an individual is treated as an inferior or superior human being. It also maintains that to make up for centuries of caste oppression, affirmative action favouring lower castes in government jobs and education should be the primary vehicle of achieving social justice. This narrative, thus, concentrates on India's religious majority, the Hindus. When it speaks of non-Hindus, it argues that both religious minorities and lower castes suffer from discrimination by higher castes. A lower caste-minorities alliance, therefore, can be constructed in politics.

The caste narrative, by and large, has risen to national prominence only of late. Successfully used to mobilize the masses in the first half of this century in south India, it has extended to the north and the west today. At the present time, the primacy of caste as a narrative of politics is mainly articulated by the Janata Dal, or JD-like parties (Samajwadi Party in U.P., BSP in much of north India, DMK in Tamil Nadu, and to some extent, TDP in Andhra Pradesh). Their power in U.P., Bihar, Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh is substantial and the present UP government is essentially a representative of this narrative.

By highlighting and reviling the social hierarchy of Hinduism, the caste

narrative attacks Hindu nationalism. It does not believe in Hindu unity. It is comfortable with the basic idea of secular nationalism that religion should not determine the rights and privileges of citizens. But it would add a great deal more. Disowning the metaphor of a family, it would place social justice at the heart of politics. As a corollary, it seeks to pit the lower castes against the upper castes, whereas the secular nationalist narrative would, in principle, make coalitions across upper and lower castes.

**T**he fact that even the historically mighty Congress party chose to be a junior partner of lower-caste politicians in the politically critical state of U.P. in the recent elections should be an indication of which narratives are on the rise in mass politics today and are likely to so remain in the future. As a matter of fact, the Congress today is not even the prime representative of the first narrative: it has become a symbol of governmental stability, eclecticism and patronage-based politics. No clear ideological tendency can be identified with Congress politics any more.

That the caste narrative has become more powerful than before, however, does not mean that it has decisively won the political battles. While it has been more effective in putting political parties in power at the state level, it has faced a great deal of difficulty in aggregating coalitions at the national level. A nationwide coalition, as we know, did come into being in 1989, but it collapsed in 1990. The current government is yet another coalition experiment of this kind, and how long it will last is still to be seen.

The biggest problems of the caste narrative are internal, some of which are vertical in nature. If the calculations of the Mandal Commission are right, the OBCs alone add up to about 44% of India. As we know, the Scheduled Castes (SC) are about 15%, and the Scheduled Tribes (ST) roughly 7%. There are lower castes of various kinds but there is no aggregate lower caste community as such. Internal hierarchies exist. At least in U.P., the SC politicians have openly rebelled against

the leading OBC politicians. Such vertical splits had also marked the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu earlier on in the century.

**P**roblems of a horizontal nature also exist. Caste exists all over India, but as sociologists and anthropologists have repeatedly reminded us, they are a local or regional entity. There are upper and lower castes in all parts of the country, but the lower castes in one state may have little to do with the lower castes elsewhere. Their names, social roles, economic functions, languages and histories have local or regional meanings. Lower castes in other places may not have the same names nor the same histories. They are all lower castes, but in different ways. Similarly, Brahmins of the South may not be recognized as such by the Brahmins of the North and vice versa: each in their respective settings has traditionally enjoyed high status and ritual privileges but each tradition may be different. The caste narrative has a nationwide resonance, but it has not been able to achieve a nationwide aggregation.

At the national level, thus, stable political coalitions representing the caste narrative may take long to form. The challenge for lower-caste based politicians is to achieve a coalitional stability. Contrariwise, not letting a coalitional unity emerge in lower caste politics is bound to be a challenge Hindu nationalists would set for themselves. Meanwhile, the Congress will perform its eclectic balancing act – allying with one party here and another there. If the ideological charge of the caste narrative and Hindu nationalism declines, the Congress would be a great beneficiary. Given that the Congress is no longer an ideological organization, whereas the lower caste politicians and Hindu nationalists are, the Congress will simply wait for the internal contradictions of the other two groupings to acquire embarrassing proportions. That will be its way to make the point that only the Congress can run a stable government in India. Whether this strategy will succeed remains an open question.

# Honour among thieves

ARVIND N. DAS

INDIAN politics is passing through a strange phase. On the one side there are apparently no major issues agitating the nation. There are no major peasant movements, no sustained trade union agitations, not even a student movement of significance. Class issues appear to have died out and even caste does not seem to have the power to excite political mobilisation. It is curious that the Dalits and tribals are engaged in seeking upward mobility through gradual incorporation in the established political-administrative system rather than through changing it. Even curiouiser is the fact that it was not the organised effort of Backward Castes that brought about the Mandal reservations. Such unrest as took place in that context was more a reflection of the resistance of privileged upper castes than the demands of the subalterns.

On the other side, the country is caught in the throes of a deep turmoil. Day after day scandals break out; courts pass unprecedented orders; seasoned politicians are sent to prison; Parliament is in perpetual uproar and the country itself is engaged in an uncontrollable cathartic

process. It appears that India is being transformed forever through an outburst of morality and is in the process of a major public purging.

But how long can this state of affairs, this uneasy twilight between day and night last? As the era of coalitional politics stabilises, the vitality of democracy is bound to seek expression. And, as likely as not, one of the major issues that appears ready to step out from the wings on the political centre-stage is that of corruption. The conventional wisdom over the last several years has been that '*Is hammam mein sab nange hain*' (Everyone is naked in this public bath). This has degenerated to such an extent that the Indian people have become cynical and probity in public life does not excite them any more.

This is patently false. The interest generated by the Chandraswami affair, the slow but inevitable unravelling of the Jain hawala case and the many, many other scandals are pointers to the fact that the people have neither forgotten nor forgiven sleaze and corruption. The fact also that apparently honest politicians –



admittedly a rare breed, even an endangered species — still excite some admiration is another indication of the public mood.

It was just about ten years ago that Vishwanath Pratap Singh was the finance minister of India. He carried a reputation for trying to liberalise the economy even while attempting to tighten the screws on economic offenders. More important, he enjoyed an image of personal probity. However, fairly soon thereafter, he came to grief in his own party since his squeaky clean image — Mr Cleaner, as it were — put a shadow on his boss who wanted to project himself as Mr Clean. V.P. Singh quickly found himself out of the government and even the Congress party. Nevertheless, his relevance in Indian politics remained and, now that he is hovering about at the back of the political stage, we are bound to hear more about him in the coming months.

**L**ike V.P. Singh, his successor in the finance ministry, Manmohan Singh too had an enviable reputation for personal probity. He too was engaged in liberalising the economy and, if there was a difference, it is only that Manmohan Singh did not lose sleep in chasing economic offenders. However, what is most striking is that Manmohan Singh, the Rajya Sabha member from Assam and increasingly projected as a leader of the post-Rao Congress, also acquired an image as a putative messiah who can outdo his boss as cleaner than Mr Clean. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*: the more things change, the more they remain the same!

But do they really remain the same? Is there not a qualitative difference in the nature of events as they repeat themselves? Do they not occur the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce, or vice-versa?

There is at least one crucial difference between Manmohan Singh and V.P. Singh in a similar situation. While V.P. Singh could have been expected at that time to come down heavily on hoarders and profiteers and thereby seek to tackle at least one element of inflation, Manmohan Singh did not take similar

action against FERA violators, tax defaulters and other economic offenders like those whose names are nowadays blazoned across the front pages of newspapers.

Not only did the second Singh show extreme lassitude in dealing with economic offenders who have raked off thousands of crores of rupees, but he constantly glanced over his shoulder to see if any of his actions caused annoyance to the precious foreign investors whom he was so desperately seeking to woo. Thus, foreign banks and other companies could get away with fraud and worse, and in the present dispensation, they enjoy immunity. Enron, for instance, was forced to renegotiate its investment in the power sector at terms more favourable to India than earlier. This could lead to only one conclusion: that earlier the company had taken the government for a ride on account of either its smartness or the incompetence, or worse, of Indian negotiators.

Manmohan Singh's successor in the finance ministry, the fleet of political foot, P. Chidambaram, carried the logic of protecting economic offenders even further. Even as well-publicised raids were carried out on ITC and a few other companies, the bureaucrats under Chidambaram argued that the top *boxwallahs* who had turned themselves into carriers of suitcases should not be punished because they were violating laws of the pre-liberalisation era. The solicitude shown for rich crooks when contrasted with the severity with which petty criminals are dealt with offended even true blue liberalisers like Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar.

**E**ven thoroughly 'market-friendly' governments like that of Singapore can extradite and punish a speculator who has caused ruin to a single financial institution and in Mexico, even under the NAFTA dispensation, it can be demanded that those responsible for wrong financial policies be tried for 'economic treason'. But in India speculators and scamsters, buccaneers and fly-by-night operators enjoy a rare protection by the political class.

The reason for this is a fear of incurring the displeasure of vested interests. This

is now so ingrained in our policy-makers that it often leads India to make a ridiculous spectacle of itself, even in international fora. It is a well-known fact of capitalism, that, even when it proclaims economic *laissez faire*, it shows no mercy in dealing with those who try to defraud the state. Income tax is levied and collected with ruthless efficiency and the Internal Revenue Service of the United States of America, for instance, is more dreaded than even its FBI. The notorious gangster Al Capone, who first took crime in the USA to inter-state dimensions, could have been applauded by the ideologues of the free market for his enterprise in production and distribution of (illicit bootlegged) liquor, but he was finally brought to book by the IRS when he failed to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's.

**I**n India, on the other hand, while the ideology of capitalism is tomtomed, its practice in this vital respect is ignored, particularly with regard to globalised wrongdoers who cheat the exchequer through *hawala* and other shady means. Indeed, while even the CBI, the Indian counterpart of the FBI, can be spurred into action by court orders, the bodies under the likes of Manmohan Singh and Chidambaram whose mandate is to deal with economic offenders remain curiously lethargic. They show enterprise and speed only when it comes to prostrating themselves before the IMF. Otherwise, they act much like the policemen in Hindi films, arriving on the scene after the action is over. Otherwise they act like the proverbial flatfoot, catching for instance the wrong Amirbhai and producing him in court. Manmohan Singh himself, till recently the guardian of the nation's exchequer, basks in the accolades showered on him as much by amoral domestic and foreign businessmen as by immoral fellow Congressmen and other politicians. And Chidambaram, of course, has such a high opinion of himself that for him self-congratulation is sufficient.

It is this tendency of averting attention from the country's interests and catering to extra-national concerns and their domestic drum-beaters which is the

bane of the current globalisation programme. Thus, while domestic concerns about corruption and outright loot of public resources to satisfy private greed are dismissed as inconsequential, the establishment waits hand and foot at the service of speculators who increase prices of essential commodities with the same felicity as they bring in and take out hot money.

Mexico learnt of the perils of precisely such an approach when it was too late. The mistakes, and some would say even complicity, of its rulers with international speculators have left the country's economy in ruins and its population in distress. Mexico now lives on handouts from Uncle Sam and has to cope with armed rebellion by its own population.

India's policy-makers pretend that they have all the answers: that neither can the Mexican situation occur here nor can speculation lead to the kind of collapse of a massive financial institution like the Barings Bank in Singapore. The fact, however, is that not only has the Indian economy under their care been rendered extremely vulnerable on account of flows of hot money which play havoc with foreign exchange rates and reserves, but the country has already witnessed a massive scam whose guilty are yet to be punished.

In this situation, the mock concern for the state of the economy as expressed by Manmohan Singh after P. Chidambaram occupied the seat that he sat on till recently, rings hollow. There is a major gap between the symbols of economic policy and its substance. And the gap is only being widened by politically scared practitioners of a borrowed ideological orthodoxy which has little use for personal probity. Manmohan Singh sees himself and is projected by his degenerate party as the one 'Congressman' left who wears the badge of personal integrity. However, as Manmohan Singh realises, uneasy lies the head that wears a halo of honesty. He too has had occasion to offer his resignation but he has been more pragmatic than others, perhaps realising that discretion is the better part of honour. He who resigns and withdraws his resignation lives to resign another day.

## Watershed elections

P. SAINATH

ONE of the delights of studying political patterns that emerged from the last general elections, long after statistical analyses have run their course, is the benefit provided by hindsight. Others have already done the work; many processes have unfolded further. And all that remains to be added are risk-free, wise comments, like mine.

That confession made, let me add that several interesting aspects relating to the Lok Sabha elections of 1996 remain to be explored. Not the least of these was the manner of their presentation to the public by the media. For instance, take the timing of the polls. Few questioned their being held in early May – a period when millions of migrant workers had still not reached home in different parts of India. Certainly, many agricultural labourers from Bihar who journeyed huge distances across the country – some all the way to the Punjab – were unable to return home in time to vote. Migrants tend to have a complicated trajectory on their return home after the harvest in their host states. All this was pretty well known, yet it made no difference while deciding the dates.

That large numbers of very poor people were effectively shut out of the voting excited little discussion. (One of the problems is, of course, that while it is the poor in India that mostly vote, election coverage and analysis are almost exclusively provided by the non-poor.) The press had more important things to cover – like T.N. Seshan playing to the media gallery with the elegance of a bull elephant doing the Swan Lake ballet on a glass floor.

But marginally differing schools of thought were already pushing some theories about the 1996 elections. As the results began to pour in, these were seen

as vindicated. Among them were: the stunning rise of the BJP; the lack of 'national issues' and predominance of 'local' issues; that 'reforms' in no way influenced people's voting patterns and liberalisation had nothing to do with the results; consequently, the lack of a discernible mandate in the results or any lessons or patterns emerging from the elections (this contradicted the idea of a supposed mandate for the BJP, but that didn't matter).

*The rise of the BJP:* Two very different groups of people are obsessed with the BJP's electoral fortunes. One, of course, is the saffron spectrum including many politicians, activists and journalists. The other comprises people of a secular, democratic orientation who rightly fear the idea of a growing BJP, but who wrongly track its advance in exclusively electoral terms. Notwithstanding the enormous—and disproportionate—media coverage given, the BJP's vote share remained virtually stagnant between the 1991 and 1996 elections: 20.1% and 20.7% roughly. The Congress in its worst electoral performance of all time still managed nearly 10% more than the BJP. Yet, the BJP won close to 40 seats more than the Congress as its base is strongly concentrated in some areas, unlike the Congress which is thinly spread across the country.

**I**n Uttar Pradesh, where it had concentrated so much effort, the BJP did not improve on its 1991 tally of 32.8% and 51 Lok Sabha seats: it took one more seat and added less than 2% to its vote. This, against a divided and fractious opposition. Compared to the 1993 assembly polls, it gained just about 1%. (The Telugu Desam in Andhra, even after a serious split, performed more creditably in 1996 against a formidable and unified opposition.) In the U.P. assembly polls this year, the BJP lost significant ground and conceded over 50 segments where it had led during the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. This despite the SP-BSP rift (In 1993, they had fought the BJP jointly).

It is worth dwelling on Uttar Pradesh for a simple reason: broader opposition unity here (even without the

Congress) would wound the BJP seriously. And if the BJP is corralled in Uttar Pradesh, its national pretensions take a dive.

**I**n Rajasthan, where the BJP held power, the party did improve its vote share by a little over 2% though it gained no seats. In its stronghold of Gujarat, the gain of about 0.3% in the 1996 polls is in fact misleading. The 1991 polls in that state were held after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, but for which fact it may have fared better. In any case, the BJP government in Gujarat has since fallen—on rivalries that have significant caste overtones. And similar, perhaps more explicit, caste loyalties are visible in its Uttar Pradesh unit.

The 1996 elections were significant for another reason: they saw the BJP slaughtered in the South. Of 130 seats in the southern states and 42 in West Bengal, it managed just seven. In the latter state, it lost nearly 5% of its 1991 vote to the Congress, accounting for that party's improved performance there. Even the two seats the BJP gained in Karnataka in 1996 came on a vote nearly 3% lower than its 28.8% in 1991.

The BJP made distinct gains in some states, particularly in Maharashtra, Bihar and Haryana, mainly because of alliances based on electoral convenience. In Bihar with socialist George Fernandes' Samata Party; in Haryana with the Haryana Vikas Party of Bansi Lal, notorious for his role in the Emergency; in Maharashtra, by piggy-backing on the Shiv Sena's strength. (In the last municipal elections in Maharashtra, the Sena-BJP alliance was trounced after only two years in power—in those very urban areas where they have traditionally been strongest.)

This is not to suggest that the BJP is a basket case or that it cannot bounce back in some states. What those obsessed with a fear of the BJP need to focus on is the damage inflicted by the party in social and cultural terms, which exceeds anything it is likely to achieve in elections. In communal and social terms, the BJP has succeeded in poisoning the well which is used by many other political forces too. This fact is more disturbing than its prowess in the electoral arena.

The BJP's national pretensions are rooted more in the media than the masses. As many of 143 of its 161 seats in May 1996 came from six states in the country. Even in the states where it is strong, it has failed to provide a government capable of completing a full term. And voting patterns suggest that public disillusionment with the BJP as a party of governance soon sets in. In fact, the gains of the regional parties in 1996 were far more spectacular in relative terms, but never got the same attention as those of the BJP, such as they were.

**T**hroughout the '80s and early '90s, the BJP sought exclusivity as a political force. In 1996 it achieved that in full measure. So exclusive was it that not a single MP from any party in the Lok Sabha could be persuaded to defect to the Vajpayee Wonder—its record-breaking, 13-day government. The party which boasted that it alone could provide stability had its government resign without the humiliation of facing a vote—where their Samata party allies would certainly have ditched them. Even a Kanshi Ram, who had broken an SP-BSP ministry and formed a BSP government with BJP help, would not come to their rescue. The BJP has not risen as a great 'national' force and its social base is the narrowest among those of the 'national' parties.

*An election with no mandate?* Only if the word mandate is restricted to something that political parties get nationally, it might be possible to argue that there was none in May 1996. To start with, the base of all political parties put together does not represent even 50% of the population. Moreover, several states produced very decisive results. Clearly, something bigger was happening: people voted for more federalism and more democracy. In a country where centre-state relations are a major and vexing issue, voters made their thinking pretty clear. They are for a more genuinely federal republic, not a quasi-unitary state. Among other things, they wanted governments they elected locally to function locally. Some chief ministers actually spent more days in Delhi than in their own state capitals, es-



pecially in the '80s. This was more true of Congress party functioning.

People also voted for representatives who actually articulate the interests of their states and constituencies. The 'national' facade has been repeatedly abused and misused, to commit crimes against the electorate's verdict and against law. For 15 years, voters in Andhra Pradesh refused to elect P.V. Narasimha Rao. He had to be brought in from Maharashtra (like Ghulam Nabi Azad later). Pranab Mukherjee has the unique distinction of being defeated in panchayat as well as Lok Sabha elections and had at one stage to be brought to the Rajya Sabha from Gujarat. Manmohan Singh consciously filed a false declaration of his resident status in Assam to be elected to the Rajya Sabha.

**V**oters are increasingly intolerant of such frauds. The 'opportunistic politician' has been quicker to see this than the media which continues to endlessly agonise over the fate of the country in the hands of regional parties. From plugging for GATT and breaking down international boundaries, P. Chidambaram settled down to defending those of Tamil culture. G.K. Mooppanar failed repeatedly to get himself elected to either the Lok Sabha or the Tamil Nadu assembly. Throughout his long stint in the Rajya Sabha, Mooppanar rarely raised an issue relating to development in his home state. In 1996, he too recognised the popular mood. Voters are seeking candidates who represent them, not some abstract principles spouted by the media and the elite. They are equally concerned with changing centre-state relations. On the whole, ordinary Indians have more faith in the endurance of their republic. Increasingly, they demand that it serves them, not a narrow parasitic strata. There is a process of search and experimentation involved in this.

Instead of panicking over people voting for 'regional' parties, let us turn the issue on its head: how long can a country survive with rulers at the centre who represent nobody but a small gaggle of big business houses?

The historic decline of the Congress party is another one of these false con-

cerns. With the exception of the 1984 polls, every election in this country since 1980 has captured this decline. In 1980, the Congress captured 42.7% of the vote. In 1984, when people feared the country's unity was in danger after its prime minister had been gunned down in her own home, this went up to 48.1%. In 1989, things were back on course. The Congress was down to 39.5%. In 1991, even after the ghastly murder of Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress got only 36.5% of the vote. In 1996, it fell to around 30% and even in Uttar Pradesh, it managed merely 8% of the vote.

The 1996 Congress vote is significantly lower than what it got in the post-emergency polls – this when large parts of the country decisively rejected the party, reducing it to just 34.5% and 154 seats. Significantly, the largest number of MPs in the present Lok Sabha belong to neither the Congress nor the BJP and arrived there by defeating both.

*The growing assertiveness of the dalits:* Most reporters who visited Uttar Pradesh during the run-up to the 1996 polls noticed an important development: dalits were going to vote in larger numbers than ever before. This was borne out by the results. Even in parts of the state where the upper castes have seldom allowed dalit voters to cast their own ballot, they risked turning out in large numbers. In this, the 1996 polls reveal a notable and positive development in Indian politics – the assertiveness of the dalit voter.

**T**he important fact is, not that they are voting for Kanshi Ram; in U.P. at least, but that they are now voting in an organised fashion, in their interests and making their own choices. Their very appearance in the electoral sphere in this mode is one of the positive developments in recent times, however sad the fact that their main political force aligned itself with the Congress in the last assembly polls. But look at it this way: the Brahmin Congress was forced to play the junior partner in the coalition. The psychological importance of this in terms of dalit self-assertion and respect should not be underestimated.

A major shift occurred after the '80s. For decades, the major political parties had agendas where a few sops were offered, almost as an afterthought, to scheduled castes, tribes and OBCs who comprise the majority of India's population. All this has changed today. These sections now have their own agendas – and each major party is scrambling to prove its credentials in implementing them. Oddly, at the same time, the limits of traditional caste-based politics also showed up as in Laloo Yadav's Bihar.

*Local issues, no economics:* The post-poll editorials of all major newspapers emphasised two facts – people voted mostly on local issues; barring perhaps corruption, there were no economic issues and that the 'reform' process had no bearings on election results.

**T**hey could hardly pretend otherwise; not after five years of highlighting a 'national consensus' on the so-called reforms. It is important to remember that the Congress party wasn't merely defeated: it was annihilated. One of the clearest features of the polls was that in almost every state people voted for the major anti-Congress force that could keep it out of power. This was recognised by political parties. This was why the BJP-Sena hypocritically opposed MNCs like Enron and 'fought' the 'reforms'. It is another matter that as soon as the combine came to power in Maharashtra, it announced, much like Gowda at the centre, that it would persist with the economic 'reforms' of the Congress. This was a different line from the stand it took between 1991-95. For three years its main plank was swadeshi, not Ayodhya; it concentrated on economic issues, not religion. Naturally, this *volte face* was made with little fuss. This is one reason why the elite and financial markets are so comfortable with the BJP: they understand its politics.

Then why cling to the illusion that there were no issues in the 1996 elections? After all, a lack of issues normally helps incumbents. However, in 1996 the electorate punished the Congress party more severely than after the Emergency that had trampled on basic civil liberties.

The per capita external debt of Indians doubled from 1991-95. The average per capita debt of Indians which used to be Rs 1,574 in 1990 stood at Rs 3,465 by the end of September 1995. However, the average Indian had not become correspondingly richer in the same period. In fact, he has been reduced to a state where he can barely exist. Food prices on the PDS were up 85% in this time frame. The real wages of agricultural labourers took a beating at the same time that food prices soared. So millions of Indians are actually eating less. Public services had reached a nadir. Were these 'local' issues?

Thus the formulation that millions of Indians voted on every possible consideration except their economic well-being is not even worth a rebuttal. To insist that economic policies had nothing to do with the greatest electoral defeat in the history of the Congress party is to argue that people do not respond to a decline in living standards. Sections of the United Front government that ignore these realities do so at their own peril.

The Congress, once a grand coalition of different classes and groups, changed character over the decades, especially since 1980s, as it increasingly deserted the poorer classes and rubbished their aspirations. This process gained momentum with what the elite proudly called their 'reforms'. The party has tried to undo that—in rhetoric. But in practice, imprisoned by the narrow interests of its financiers, it cannot.

The astonishing truth about the 590 million strong Indian electorate, mostly poor people, is how they use elections as an instrument to sort out their governments. And it is they, not the chattering classes, who vote. In some countries, including Australia, voting is compulsory under law. This is thought necessary to fight voter apathy. In India, the problem is how to stop the poor from voting, even if this means capturing booths and terrorising dalit communities.

In 1996, the electorate changed some features of Indian politics dramatically, perhaps irreversibly. But in doing so, it made one vital point: that it is the poor who keep democracy alive in this country.

## Cooking our goose

BHARAT KARNAD

NEW, strong, innovative foreign and military policies are apparently beyond the ken of coalition governments. They are understandably preoccupied with remaining in office for that one extra year, that additional month, failing which, until the next week-end. There is no reason why this should be so. But this is the way it has been with the United Front regime presently ensconced in New Delhi.

Actually, if this manifestly unstable H.D. Deve Gowda government had the wit and the nerve (which it so far has not shown), it could easily translate its parlous political situation into an extended stay in office by pursuing an assertive 'India First' policy in the national security realm. For a start, it should immediately sanction an accelerated series of time-wise telescoped, intermediate-range and near inter-continental range Agni tests with serial production of the earlier 'proven' variant of this ballistic missile as a stop-gap solution for the country's mounting strategic problems. And parallelly, permit qualitatively stepped-up nuclear tests of tritium-boosted atomic weapons, following-on

quickly with full-fledged thermonuclear (hydrogen) weapon testing even as design and manufacture of various warheads to fit numerous missile sizes proceeds apace. (Like the Agni stop-gap, the 10-18 kiloton Pokharan device too may be speedily configured into deliverable weapons carried by IRBM and the soon-to-be-inducted Sukhoi-30 MKIs.)

These two sets of policy initiatives would, foremost, firm up the United Front's support among the people who have time and again discovered to their consternation weak-willed governments in New Delhi, a little too fearful of supposed foreign economic reprisals, all too eager to cave under foreign pressures and compromise the country's security.

**T**his would establish the UF's credentials as a strong nationalistic party willing to stand up to the big powers and widen its base among those fairly large and distinctive sections of the electorate drawn to the BJP for the latter's unapologetic stance on 'the Bomb' and on defence. Politically, these measures would, on the right, outflank the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose strong positions on national security is, besides the Hindu card, its defining marker. It would prevent the BJP from holding the unassailable high ground.

Finally, it would provide hard evidence that India intends to preserve its freedom of action to pursue its legitimate foreign and military policy interests using all means that have currency in international relations, including nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems, come what may. And that, what is right for the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France cannot be wrong for India or any other aspirant to big power status.

Change and flux are as natural to world affairs as is the rise and decline of states. All the self-abnegating rubbish about disarmament and morality spouted by a succession of soft-headed Indian governments since independence notwithstanding, the fact is that military power remains the one constant in history which alone has determined whether a

country can reach its international apogee. It is time some government in New Delhi understands and acts on these facts of international life.

Alas, the UF government showed its hand early on and it was not reassuring. When Foreign Secretary Salman Haidar, possibly under instructions of the then fatally prevaricating Prime Minister-cum-Foreign Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, declared in February 1996 in Geneva that India did not require nuclear weapons for its security, many in the Indian 'pol-mil' (political-military) community clucked disapprovingly and awaited a new government, hoping against hope it would reverse direction and gears. But the first action of Inder Kumar Gujral (less a foreign policy innovator than a foreign office apparatchik), on assuming the mantle of minister of external affairs was to reiterate the Haidar line. The conviction grew that India's national security goose was, to use Liddell-Hart's memorable phrase to describe the idealised working of the German Schlieffen Plan of the First World War, 'having its neck stretched to receive the axe', being sharpened at the CTBT forum in Geneva.

**I**nstead, when Ambassador Arundhati Ghose, perhaps a trifle late in the proceedings to really make a difference to the final outcome, vetoed the CTBT final draft and turned the sharp edge of the proceedings against the nuclear weapon countries, there was surprised relief. The Indian government had finally discovered the reserves of guts and gumption so conspicuously lacking in predecessor regimes. The hope that this bold first step would be followed by the next logical one of ordering nuclear and missile tests as a prelude to fielding a strategic weapons force was, however, belied. Gujral and his MEA flattered only to deceive, reverting to that same old hackneyed prescription of 'keeping our options open' which has served as an increasingly threadbare cover for a succession of spineless regimes.

It is another matter that this policy construct defies all understanding and makes no sense whatsoever while disporting itself as India's unique strategic doc-

trine. All that can be said in its favour is that it has provided international strategic literateurs a fresh bone to gnaw on.

Concepts like 'recessed deterrence', 'opaque deterrence', 'non-weaponised deterrence', 'virtual deterrence' and what-not deterrence, have been spawned. These have had the effect of lulling New Delhi into thinking that its capability is sufficient for its security. It is another matter that the nuclear weapons powers would be happy for India to obtain every kind of deterrence except the real thing!

**T**he priority of the nuclear weapons states is, in effect, to keep India from initiating nuclear weaponisation schemes in the next three years – the time frame during which an unfair and unequal CTBT comes into force. Thereafter, the trade and economic sanctions envisaged by the big powers will ensure that the CTBT writ runs, rendering transition to weapons status by threshold powers like India that much more onerous.

In other words, the Indian goose may have escaped the axe in Geneva in 1996. But it will not be able to avoid being dressed and basted with disarmament sauce, laced with moralistic rhetoric and promises, before being shoved into the hot CTBT oven for a proper cooking in the year 2000.

The Indian government may then protest all it wants that not having signed the treaty and not being a party to the treaty it cannot be corralled by the CTBT provisions. Legally that would be correct, but realistically the 'window of opportunity' for India to attain nuclear equality, which is slowly closing in the wake of the CTBT, will have been forever shut. The cost of nuclear transgressions will thereafter become too prohibitive for even a strong-willed government in New Delhi.

It is this finality that the Indian government, unfortunately, has not even begun to appreciate. Why else, despite every provocation, is it fighting so hard against exercising the N-option the country has kept 'open' for so long? What will provoke New Delhi into making the obvious choice to finally ensure this country's security?

China has cold-bloodedly conveyed nuclear weapons and missile technologies to Pakistan with a view to strategically contain India. And yet, Prime Minister Deve Gowda, a foreign policy innocent if there is one, happily accepted Jiang Zemin's statement that Beijing had done no such thing! And that all the reports, intelligence and otherwise, of transfer of nuclear warhead designs and M-11 missiles and technologies, are only figments of the imagination. Almost a decade ago, another Indian leader had been similarly duped. All that Chairman Deng had to do was to look long and hard into Rajiv Gandhi's eyes and to hold his proffered hand in a friendly grasp for the Indian prime minister to be convinced that the Chinese meant well and that bilateral relations needed to thaw.

**T**his is akin to the police accepting the protestations of a habitual 'bad character' without demur and letting him go, rather than taking steps to compel responsible behaviour in the future. In China's case these would involve offering small numbers of the Prithvi short-range missile and Agni 'technology demonstrator' technologies to Vietnam (or any other country for that matter, which can militarily discomfit China) and by signing new agreements with Hanoi for 'nuclear technology cooperation'. It is the one and only country, other than Japan, the Chinese are mightily scared of. Even as these Vietnam assistance policies are operationalized, New Delhi should imitate Beijing's *chutzpah* and maintain, straight-faced, that no such goods and technology which are not for 'peaceful purposes' are being passed on to the Vietnamese, and simply refuse to acknowledge any evidence to the contrary!

But this is day-dreaming! Has there ever been an Indian government with the mettle to be tough with China? Like the cowardly bully, all our jingoism is directed at Pakistan, a politically and militarily weak country which by any objective reckoning never was a credible adversary.

Foreign Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 1979 and President R. Venkat-

raman in 1983, on state visits to Beijing, were respectively greeted by news of the invasion of Vietnam and of a megaton nuclear test. Any self-respecting country would have responded in kind. But rather than trigger a second 'peaceful nuclear explosion' or loose off the ninth Agni intermediate range ballistic missile deliberately timed to coincide with Jiang's touch down at Palam, actions which would have forced China (and every other big power) to sit up and take notice, the United Front government chose to uphold the country's hard-won reputation for being hospitable suckers.

As curtain-raiser, Deve Gowda officially forsook the leverage provided by the Tibet-issue in his meeting with Chinese Premier Li Peng at the World Food Conference in Rome. His team in the Ministry of External Affairs went a step further. To win brownie points with Beijing, they agreed to settle the border dispute on the basis of, not equitable security, but the Chinese formulation of 'mutual and equal security'. This last may have permanently undermined Indian national security interests, as even a cursory examination of the 11-point Sino-Indian accord on 'confidence building measures' will show.

**A**nd to think that in the run up to the Jiang Zemin visit, a noted press commentator had advised that it was time to 'talk turkey to the Dragon!' The trouble is that while we may be good at talking turkey, the Chinese are experts at stuffing it, which is what they did. But this complementarity of approaches, according to which we give and they take is, after all, the mainstay of bilateral relations predicated on the appeasement of China. In that sense, the concessions made this time around are an exaggeration of, not a departure from, past policies.

In the fifties it formally led to ceding of the military buffer state of Tibet to Mao's China with nothing in return, except promises of good conduct vide subscription to the platitudinous principles of *panchshila*. These mantra-like, were mouthed by Jiang as well. This has since resulted in Beijing's determined cul-

tivation of countries on our periphery and a gradual strangling encirclement of India. Not surprisingly, there has been no hint of riposte from New Delhi, notwithstanding the many opportunities available to India over the years to undermine China in a hard-hitting tit for tat policy. This alone, history shows, can elicit respect and restraint from Beijing.

**C**onsidering that India's China policy has never gone beyond fawning, gratuitously self-disabling attempts to curry favour with the 'middle kingdom', it is not surprising that A.P. Venkateswaran, former Ambassador to China and Foreign Secretary, when invited to meet the visiting President and his entourage at a function hosted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, perceived in the 'pompous' conduct of Comrade Jiang shades of a 'vice-roy visiting one of his satrapies'. But then the China blind-spot, like the nuclear weapons lacuna, in Indian foreign policy is too glaring to miss. Just as it reduced Jawaharlal Nehru to blithering, it has seemingly infected our present set of leaders with terminal gullibility. There is no other explanation for the core Article III of the CBMs Agreement?

The crux of this Article is that the strength of forces and armaments in the zone on either side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) be reduced in accordance with the concept of mutual and equal security. The final document may be no more than a reworking of ideas bandied about in Sino-Indian official parleys for close on 15 years now, but this does not make the central concept any less dangerous – because it sets the terms of any eventual agreement – and spurious.

First, as the experts will vouch, the Chinese have no definite idea of where the LAC actually is. They have always operated on the principle that 'the land we claim (in the Indian North East) as ours is, of course, ours; and the land Indians claim as theirs is also ours'!

Based on this attitude, Beijing has all along stoutly resisted delineating the LAC on the map as a prelude to demarcating the border on the ground. If they



now seem ready to take the first step of exchanging maps; it is neither here nor there. A good chunk of the erstwhile NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) according to their cartographers, may well end up on the Chinese side rendering any worthwhile solution unnegotiable.

Second, any version of a de-militarized zone (DMZ) straddling the border runs up against a terrain anomaly. The withdrawal by the two countries to an equal distance behind an unclear LAC will push Chinese forces, say, 40 kms back on the Tibetan plateau while pushing the Indian Army out of some key positions on the heights, which enable effective policing and control of the border. It will push the army down onto the slopes from where it is; in operational terms, an impossible climb back to the LAC, leave alone engage in any decisive actions with appropriate levels of operational logistics support. However, the People's Liberation Army could mobilize in strength as it is only a short, motorable distance from the line to which its military has pulled back.

**B**ut more worrisome is the fact that apart from banning higher calibre, long-range artillery from the DMZ, the negotiations mooted under Article III are to be tasked specifically with limiting the number of surface-to-surface missile weapon systems emplaced in this 'sanitised' area. This is a clever device, piggy-backing on the one-sided concept of mutual and equal security, which MEA had apparently neither the presence of mind nor even the inclination to keep out of the final document. This ensures that our notional deterrent in the form of the nuclear warheaded Prithvi missile with 150-200 km range will be unable effectively to threaten in mass any value targets in even the adjoining southern Tibet region, what to talk of targets farther afield. The counterpart Chinese medium-range ballistic missiles deployed in central Tibet and therefore not negotiable under this agreement will, however, continue to have many of the most important north Indian cities in their range.

The reality of military strength begetting respect has still to dawn on our

political leaders and old-time diplomats. They remain convinced that 'adroit diplomatic manoeuvres', to quote ex-Foreign Secretary Mani Dixit, will suffice to safeguard national security interests. This belief prevails despite our past experiences.

**T**he last time the two countries came to blows was some ten years back when the Indian Army reacted aggressively against the Chinese military's boundary-stretching exercise of moving in on isolated Indian posts in the Somdurong Chu. The Chinese not only hastily beat a retreat but rethought their policy of militarily confronting India. Indeed, Beijing's desire for a rapprochement with India dates from that near-war.

The PLA High Command quickly realised the futility of taking 'a chicken knife to a bullock' and supported Comrade Deng's suggestion for a new, more peaceable tack, which was to extract concession and support for the present China-benefitting status quo, without conceding anything in return. The MEA has been complicit in helping Jiang and company achieve these aims with the CBMs accord, even though this will take the Indian military out of the picture.

The extent to which the Government of India is intimidated by China may be gauged from the fact that it has not even owned up to military measures oriented chiefly against the Chinese threat. Thus, for example, in all official statements regarding the acquisition of the Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter-bomber, there is no mention that this is in the main a nuclear weapons-delivery system. Squadrons of this aircraft will fulfill the role of a manned nuclear deterrent force capable of striking deep into China in the foreseeable future in lieu of the full-fledged development of the Agni missile.

Having found that it was only an Indian bird that for a while masqueraded as a buffalo, the Chinese can hardly be faulted, when the occasion arose, to stuff the turkey with all the savoury trimmings of panchshila and 'peace and tranquillity' on the border, and to ready it for the carving. Ah, well; the chicken knife will do!

# The year of the bear

T. N. NINAN

1996 began with the Bombay stock exchange's 30-share sensitive index hovering below the 3000 mark. At a gathering of businessmen at the time, the question went round as to where the index might be at the end of the year. Most people present forecast a fairly rapid ascent to 4000, not too far behind the October 1994 peak of 4600. The lone voice forecasting that the index might in fact drop to 2000 was dismissed out of hand.

The optimists seemed to have been proved right very quickly, because the index did top 4000 by the summer. But it has been a long slide since then. And towards the end of the year the index was back below 3000 and threatening to touch a new low-point in the year, if not a three-year low. Two successive trading years (till Diwali 1995 and till Diwali 1996) have seen share prices take a hammering. And now a third year of bad news seems in the offing.

There have been few instances earlier of three bear years in a row. What is wrong? The answer is macro-economic mismanagement, and a variety of sins committed by Corporate India, with reforms having reached a *cul de sac*.

There is an all-pervasive lack of confidence in the near-term future – the result of the share slump, or the raid raj, political uncertainty, lack of money in the system, customer reluctance to spend, the fear of being swamped by international business or a combination of these factors. In their different ways, these reasons point to complex underlying problems.

Indian companies have faced troubled times before but it is difficult to recall a period when corporate profits actually fell, as they did in the first half of 1996-97. Some 1000 leading companies reporting their half-year results (till September), showed a decline in net profits of 2%. Some of the companies have

57.

not provided for the minimum alternative tax in their half-yearly results. If this is corrected for, the fall in net profits is 5%, at a time when sales income is up over 15%. In comparison, net profit for 1000 leading companies rose by a handsome 22% in 1995-96, and in the previous year (1994-95) by a fantastic 64.5%.

It is tempting to argue that while companies may be doing badly, industry is not. Because the government's figures show that growth in 172 selected industries in the April-August period averaged 8.6%. This figure would have been still higher but for a precipitous fall in the production of crude oil and fertiliser. And since both can be imported, neither should act as a break on the rest of industry, which may well have averaged growth of over 10% – not bad by any yardstick.

It would be equally tempting to argue that a good year lies ahead because the excellent monsoon has meant a record crop of cotton and sugar, and perhaps oilseeds as well. So agro-based industries should do well, as should companies that feed on rural demand.

**I**t is this dichotomy between corporate performance and industrial production that has spelt endless confusion about whether there is a recession or not. Technically speaking, a recession occurs when industrial production falls for two quarters in a row. This clearly has not happened. Yet the problems that companies face are very real indeed. Is the problem purely financial? In some ways, yes. But then, aren't all economic problems eventually financial ones?

Right now, there is a confluence of three forces. In 1994-95, not only had profits surged 65%, but companies were awash in money. Many of them had raised money in the booming stock market (as well as in the newly opened up market for global depository receipts in Europe); and not having immediate use for this cash, re-invested it in stocks, real estate or the money market. This showed up in the financial results: a study of 200 companies for 1994-95 showed that 'other income' contributed as much as 40% to pre-tax profit in that year.

But the stock market peaked in October 1994, real estate prices too began tumbling (in parts of Mumbai they are now barely half the levels that prevailed two-three years ago), and companies found they couldn't pull their money out of these markets without booking substantial losses. The money cycle was broken, because companies that had borrowed in the inter-corporate market couldn't repay, causing problems for the healthier companies that had lent to them.

**T**he second force at work was electoral. In a transparent attempt to bring inflation down in the run-up to the general election, the Reserve Bank poured a bucket of oil on the smouldering financial fire in October 1995, by announcing a sharp credit squeeze in its 'busy season' credit policy. The RBI kept arguing that there was no credit squeeze, that commercial credit was in fact going through the roof, and this was of course true (more on this later). But over-all money supply ended up well short of the year's target, and the surging interest rates told their own story.

The third force at work was the momentum of liberalisation itself. Buoyed by excellent industrial growth, record profits, the stock market boom and the optimism of the bright future heralded by Manmohan Singh, companies of all sizes embarked on massive investment projects. Companies with sales that ran into hundreds of crores planned projects with investment that ran into thousands of crores. The finances were to come from either the stock market or the government-owned financial institutions – whose loan sanctions touched record levels.

But when the time came for the loans to be actually disbursed, the institutions found they did not have the money to lend. Companies that were mid-way through their projects found they couldn't turn to the stock market either because the market had crashed and the primary market for new issues had taken a horrendous beating. In desperation they turned to the banks, or to the inter-corporate market. This showed up in the RBI's figures of a boom in commercial bank credit, but the fact was that there was no money

in the system – money supply in 1995-96 grew by just 13%, against the target of 16%.

That helped the RBI achieve its primary objective: inflation was brought down to barely 4% at one stage, and remains at around 6.5%. But this success has been bought by squeezing all liquidity out of the system. Real interest rates (the difference between the nominal interest rate and the rate of inflation) for most borrowers has been hovering at 12% and more, a level that was previously unknown in India.

Inevitably, with money flowing into fixed deposits (because of the high interest rates), there was net disinvestment in shares and virtually everyone stayed away from real estate. By one assessment, all categories of domestic investors – the financial institutions, mutual funds and individual investors – have been disinvesting in stocks by about Rs 1,000 crore per month. Many shares have been selling at price earning ratios that would have seemed inconceivable a couple of years ago; the shares of financial companies have even been selling at well below book value. The only buyers have been the foreign institutional investors. Without them, the BSE Sensex might well have dropped to 2000 by now.

**B**y mid-1996, a new phase had taken over in this unhappy saga. The government itself, faced with a stubborn deficit that refused to come down, found it difficult to borrow money in the market, and drove up interest rates in order to get takers for its paper. Fully secure government debt was therefore going at close to 14%. And the banks, under pressure to improve the quality of their loan assets, quickly decided to put their money in government paper instead of lending to the already cash-starved companies.

This was the classic crowding out situation feared by macro-economic pundits: government borrowing was crowding out private borrowing. In the first half of 1996-97, the banks' commercial credit actually fell by some Rs 3000 crore. The problem now was not a shortage of funds with the banks, but their unwillingness to

lend to companies, many of whom were no longer such good risks anyway.

The finance minister tried desperately to address this by virtually coercing the Reserve Bank, in its latest 'busy season' credit policy, to pump more money into the system in an effort to drive down interest rates, and then virtually ordered the banks to lend. It was the 'dharma' of the banks to lend, P. Chidambaram said in an interview, and declared that bank chairmen would be assessed on how much lending they had done. This was tantamount to catching the bull by the tail because bank chairmen had been told up till now that they had to show good assets and good profits. Now, they were being prodded to lend when the underlying problem lay with the man who was giving them this advice: the finance minister and his fiscal deficit.

At some point in this kind of an economic tale, you get to the stage where it is impossible to avoid using the term 'vicious circle'. And that point has come now. Because the loss of industrial/corporate momentum has meant that excise collections have been affected; the loss of momentum in the economy as a whole has meant that imports are stagnant (growing at no more than 6.42% up to October). Indeed, the startling fact is that non-oil imports have actually fallen by a stunning 19%. (As an aside, oil imports have gone up by 42% because of a drop in domestic production.)

**W**ith customs and excise collections falling short of expectations, it is almost certain that the finance minister will not be able to collect the tax revenue that he postulated in his Budget. On the other hand, various ministries and ministers (including the prime minister) have been making merry by announcing new spending plans. At the same time, the public-sector disinvestment target of Rs 5000 crore is certain to be missed (how many shares can you sell in such a dull market?). That means the fiscal deficit will end up well above the limit of 5% of GDP that P. Chidambaram had forecast.

This leaves him with two choices: (i) ask the RBI to print more currency notes

(thereby increasing the budget deficit and risking fresh inflation); or (ii) borrow still more from the markets (which could lead to still more crowding out of private borrowing). Neither is good for the economy in its present state. With industrial production flagging, non-oil imports crashing, corporate profits tumbling, tax collection falling short of target, and the fiscal deficit out of control, it is no surprise that there is a fundamental lack of confidence in the near-term future – as reflected in the steadily falling share prices.

**C**orporate India is therefore at the end of its tether. Many companies have tried to ride out the rough patch by keeping the production wheels moving and pushing goods into dealers' show-rooms. But customers are holding back, partly because they too buy on borrowed money (interest rates are high and many of them already have car, housing or other loans to repay). So inventories have piled up. Beyond a point, therefore, production has to slacken off and this process has probably begun.

Add to this a whole series of other factors that affect sentiment and you have the makings of a full-blown crisis. The ITC, Shaw Wallace and other episodes have raised the fear of a return to V.P. Singh's raid raj of 1986. And try as P. Chidambaram might to assure industry that this is not his intention, the fact remains that companies are being sucked into the many scandals affecting politicians. Leading corporates are being accused of financing the pay-off of MPs belonging to the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha; yet other companies are implicated in the cases involving Sukh Ram; 20 coffee exporting companies are being investigated for switch trade involving shipments to Russia, where rupee-payment exports are said to have been switched to dollar markets; some 3000 other exporters are being charged with misuse of the value-based advance licence (vabal) scheme; and so on down a lengthening list.

Then there is the political uncertainty. It is clear that the partners in the

United Front government – India's first coalition at the centre – have begun looking at re-alignments. The prime minister has invited the Congress to join his government, and offered it six or eight cabinet berths. The left would not be party to such an arrangement, signalling that Prime Minister Deve Gowda is willing to ditch the left, which has turned up the decibel level of its criticism of the government's economic policies. The present Congress president wants to consolidate his own forces and will probably make a pitch for power in the new year. With the leading players having crossed the mental divide where they are no longer committed to their existing partnerships, it is the beginning of the end of the UF government. How long the collapse will take is the only remaining question. Could it be before the budget?

**M**eanwhile, the reform process has lost all momentum. The finance minister pegs away gamely at his agenda, but few in the government are driven by the urge to reform anything. The privatisation of the telecom sector is in need of a fresh start; the opening up of the insurance sector is still a question mark; the hopes of major private investment in power have evaporated; the banks continue to turn up unpleasant surprises in their results; the system's commitment to fiscal rectitude is brittle; and the world looks askance at fresh evidence of India being a functioning anarchy and invests its dollars elsewhere.

India's industrialists might survey this scene and still feel okay about the future if their own castles were safe from assault, but that isn't the case either. Joint venture castles are exposed as having been built in the air and have quickly come crashing down: Honda and Shriram, Daewoo and Bharat Ram, Coca-Cola and Chauhan, Du Pont and Thapar, Procter & Gamble and Godrej, General Electric and Apar. Even stand-alone castles are now exposed to attack because of the new takeover code that is being prepared. So India's business tycoons have gone into defensive mode, and are busy shoring up their shareholding (Tata, for instance) or



lobbying to give themselves safety hatches in the takeover code.

With no money in the system, many of them find it easier to access the capital markets abroad, or to sell to foreign institutional investors at home. In other words, India is now exporting its capital market. But this has also meant a new emphasis on corporate governance, more transparent accounting practices and other uncomfortable intellectual imports that the leading families would rather do without.

**T**he Raymond Singhanias tried to issue non-voting shares, but in the face of strong disapproval from the FIIs had to beat a hasty retreat. LMW group in Coimbatore tried to de-subsidiarise investment companies that held group shares, but angry bear hammering of LMW shares by the FIIs brought the management running to them in contrite manner. The demand for a level playing field has given way to an angry question: whose country is this anyway?

The foreign invasion is usually a good thing for customers, but spells trouble for domestic entrepreneurs in even the simplest businesses. Anyone who deals in the property market with a Colliers Jardine or Richard Ellis would prefer their upfront professionalism to the *desi* wiles of the bucket shop real estate agent. In the share bazar, the only brokers who can hope to survive are those who have FII clients, and these must offer professional services on a scale that the majority cannot hope to match (so 4000 of the 5000 brokers in Mumbai might go out of business). The leading advertising agencies have all tied up with international names in the business, because without a global partner they won't get MNC clients. And what good is an ad agency that can't boast of an MNC client list?

In the larger businesses, the foreigners have a time frame for getting a return on their investment that is well beyond the time frame of most domestic businessmen. R.P. Goenka revealed some years ago that he expected his money back in three years; overseas companies in

contrast are happy to build marketshare for 10 years and lose money throughout that period, in the expectation that they will make money for the next 100 years.

But which Indian businessman has the deep pockets required for that kind of strategy? Ramesh Chauhan sold his soft drinks business to Coke, and his 65% marketshare for \$40 million. It seemed a large sum of money in 1993. But now Coke proposes to invest \$700 million in expanding the Indian soft drinks market. If Chauhan hadn't sold out, he would have been fighting cannon with a pea-shooter. So many now have the private thought: If this is what liberalisation and globalisation mean, who wants it anyway? From that to influencing politicians to stymie more opening up of the economy is but a short step. Consumers give politicians their votes, but it is the big producers who give politicians the money to get those votes. It is in many ways an unequal battle.

All in all, the dawn of the great new age of liberalisation has meant a new set of troubles, or troubling questions, for Indian companies and their controlling families.

**T**he picture of Indian business in trouble can be easily overdrawn, of course; certainly, the foreign presence in Indian industry is still small, compared to most economies. The broad picture that emerges is of foreign companies being at an advantage in businesses where brand names, proprietary technology or extended investment is critical. That still leaves more than enough room for Indian business to flourish in areas as diverse as textiles and cement, petrochemicals and steel, aluminium and engineering, fertiliser and commercial vehicles, not to speak of pharmaceuticals and electronic software. The real test is whether the bulk of Indian business is rising to the challenges of the new environment.

One response has come from the Singhanias of JK Industries, who got shareholder approval at an extraordinary general meeting for raising the annual salaries of managing directors Raghupati Singhania and Bharat Hari Singhania

from Rs 10.5 lakh to Rs 39 lakh, and director Vikrampati Singhania from Rs 10.5 lakh to Rs 30 lakh. In addition, they will each get perquisites of Rs 10 lakh annually, and 2% of net profits (of Rs 20.97 crore), apart from retirement benefits to all three and executive chairman Hari Shankar Singhania that include an ex gratia payment equal to three years' pay, and an unspecified monthly payment, apart from half this sum to their wives if the husbands die first. JK Industries justifies this on the ground that the company should look after the top management so that it remains committed to the organisation, attracts talent and prevents a flight of personnel. The annual payment to the Singhania family works out to about Rs 1.80 crore, apart from future pension and ex gratia benefits.

**T**hat might not seem an extraordinary amount, given the salaries that are offered to 'gold collar managers'. But is chief executive excess the answer to the challenges of the day? What are these challenges?

- \* Further fiscal consolidation: because of the impact this will have on interest rates, external balances and inflation, not to speak of investment;

- \* Sectoral reform: to remove the inefficiencies that remain in the system, through further opening up and privatisation;

- \* Investment in infrastructure: calling for more sectoral reform, in order to attract much more investment — domestic and foreign;

- \* Business practices: reform in terms of accounting standards, transparency, accountability, and product quality, so that Indian business can win the loyalty of shareholders and customers, and thereby operate on a level playing field in the most meaningful way;

- \* Political consciousness of the reform imperative: to ensure that the next 50 years are significantly better than the last 50.

In their different ways, the troubles of the present underline how little of the reform road has been travelled by the country.

# Indian enterprise

SANJAYA BARU

MORE than five years after the introduction of radically new economic policies in India, and close to two decades after the shift from the strategy of inward-looking import-substitution to a relatively more outward-looking strategy of industrialisation, with a liberal trade and investment regime, the political economy of Indian capitalism in the era of liberalisation is yet to be written. There is ample literature on the political economy of industrial policies of the post-independence period, especially the period 1947-75. There is also a growing body of literature, qualitatively and empirically more wanting by comparison with the literature on the earlier period, analysing the economic crises of the late 1960s and 1970s and explaining macro-economic policy changes in the 1970s and 1980s. What is lacking, however, is the analysis of the political economy of the directional shift in the 1990s in terms of the changing nature of India's business and middle classes.

Since the so-called 'new economic policies' (hereafter NEP) introduced by the government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1991 came in the aftermath of a balance-of-payments and fiscal crisis, economists have by and large analysed these changes in terms of their macro-economic rationale. Both supporters and opponents of these changes have stuck to a largely economic theoretic critique of

these policies – either justifying them within the framework of neo-classical theory or critiquing them in terms of Marxist or Keynesian theory.

Thus, the argument of the neo-classical economists focuses attention almost exclusively on the irrationality of the economics that underpinned the policies of the Nehru-Indira period. Isher Ahluwalia's seminal critique of the *ancien regime* (1985), lays the blame for low growth and productivity of the industrial sector almost entirely on flawed macro-economic policies and the regulatory regime, the so-called 'licence-permit raj', with no attempt to understand why the Indian business class accepted this regime in the early years and why at least some of them sought a change in later years.

In a recent study, Joshi and Little (1996) suggest that the big business and the influential middle class gained from the *ancien regime* but they fail to explain why there has been a change in policies that is consistent with their view of the political economy of what they call the 'Old India Model'. Joshi and Little sum up:

'There is very widespread agreement that the old highly protectionist, highly controlled and restrictive India Model failed to achieve the primary objective of a rapid growth in real income that was widely shared by the mass of the people.... Many of the detailed regu-

61

lations that stifled Indian enterprise were justified as having the aim of protecting the poor. More often than not they had the opposite effect as they protected mainly those already relatively privileged. Very little indeed was done, at least until recently, to help the extremely poor, whether by stimulating employment or by direct transfers. At the same time very large subsidies to power, irrigation, fertilizers and food have been paid, but these accrued mainly to the middle classes. The old India Model may be justly described as one of exclusive *bourgeois socialism*.'

Joshi and Little's term 'bourgeois socialism' mirrors the traditional Marxist interpretation of the post-independence Indian economy in terms of *State Capitalism*. Either way, the assertion is that there is a unified, if not homogenous, capitalist class whose interests have been well-served by an interventionist, if populist, state. Surprisingly, neither the neo-classicals, who view state intervention in terms of efficiency and the Marxists, who view it in terms of vested interest and class power, have addressed the question as to what may have happened to either 'bourgeois socialism' or 'state capitalism' that can explain the shift in economic policy within the framework of such a paradigm. In short, there is no structuralist explanation available for the change in the policy regime which is internally consistent.

The left critique of NEP has also been flawed in as much as the focus of attention is almost exclusively either on the 'irrationality' of the economic theory underpinning NEP or on external economic 'pressures', both from multilateral financial institutions and bilateral donors and major trade partners or investors. There is no attempt to explore the indigenous stimulus for change in industrial policy and the likely sources of support for NEP within the business and middle classes. The resistance from some traditional big business houses (the so-called Bombay Club) to trade and investment liberalisation has been interpreted as generalised opposition from domestic business to NEP. The Bombay Club's

denunciation of foreign investment liberalisation and demand for a 'level playing field' has been interpreted as evidence of resistance to NEP from domestic business. The fact that the support for the Bombay Club was thin, that its sponsors soon became defensive in their posture and that many other businessmen denounced such protectionist lobbying, and the Confederation of Indian Industry had to beat a hasty retreat in its campaign, suggests that non-Bombay Club business are a significant group and it is necessary to understand where they derive their support from.

That there are dissensions within the business community with losers protesting and gainers supporting is a tack that has hardly been followed up. What is more perplexing is the fact that few have asked the question whether the nature of Indian business has undergone any change that may explain a change in the regime of industrial policy.

While opposition political parties like the BJP and the CPM have tried to exploit the anxieties of the Bombay Club to criticise foreign investment liberalisation, there has in fact been no popular movement against NEP or sympathy within the middle class for the Bombay Club. More importantly, the professional middle class and small enterprise have not been as critical of external liberalisation as, indeed, has been the big business class.

Articulating the view of the non-orthodox left in a popular essay on NEP, Bhaduri and Nayyar (1996) say: 'The architects of economic liberalisation pretended that these reforms induced by the needs of immediate crisis-management are also the reforms needed for development. In this, they were certainly encouraged by the IMF and the World Bank.' In a chapter tellingly entitled *Liberalisation: A Crisis-driven Response*, Bhaduri and Nayyar attribute NEP almost entirely to either an ideologically motivated response to the fiscal and BOP crisis of 1990-91 or to explicit pressure from an elite that is seen as benefiting from NEP. That differences exist within this 'elite' is not recognised.

In understanding the sociology and politics of the support for NEP it is important to make a distinction between two aspects of NEP, namely, fiscal adjustment and economic liberalisation. While adjustment was undoubtedly crisis-driven and had little domestic support apart from committed economists who believed in the efficacy of the macroeconomic policies being introduced, there was much wider support for liberalisation. It is a different matter that many of the liberalisation policies were introduced along with the adjustment programme in a bid to weaken any possible resistance from vested interests. However, the two constitute separate elements of NEP and must be analysed as such. The support for liberalisation of economic policy, especially trade and investment policy has come from (i) middle class professionals, including the managerial class; (ii) first generation enterprise, regional businesses; and (iii) 'surplus' farmers, rich peasantry.

The ancien regime, it has been adequately documented, had served the interests of India's traditional, big business groups. The social characteristics of the traditional big business groups has also been widely researched – mainly marwaris, Jains, and a range of bania/vaishya castes from north-western India, who established their dominance within the business sector even during the colonial period. Their investment was largely localised in Bombay and Calcutta, with tentacles spread into Delhi and its environs, Madras and a few urban centres like Coimbatore and Ahmedabad. In the post-independence period, in particular in the post-green revolution period, a distinctly new group of first generation business groups has come into existence. The regional concentration of such groups appears to be linked with agrarian transformation and/or external trade or service. These emergent capitalists are mainly located in the Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

The most important source of capital formation for such groups was

agriculture. The movement of capital from agriculture into manufacturing has mainly been in the green revolution areas where a new class of surplus farmers has emerged over the last two decades. An early exploration into the link between agrarian dynamism and transformation and the growth of manufacturing activity was K.N. Raj (1976). Few have followed up Raj's seminal essay with detailed empirical work. Today it is more clear than ever before that regional differentiation in growth of manufacturing has been deeply influenced by variations in agrarian development.

A second form of transformation has been in states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu where business or middle class families which have established links through trade or professional migration with external sources or bases of capital formation have been able to move into the manufacturing or services sector. A third source of capital formation has been the state sector itself. Thus, contractors involved in public works, like construction of large dams, roads and so on, have accumulated capital by siphoning large sums of money from the government. The link of such groups with politics or administration should be clear. In all three cases, public investment and expenditure has played a key role in aiding private capital formation.

**T**he emergence of new business groups coupled with the dynamism of Indian industry resulted in significant structural changes within the business class. Indeed, such change has impacted even the apex of the business pyramid with changes occurring at the very top. Thus, half of the top 20 business houses listed in 1969-70, ranked by asset size, have been relegated to the 'junior' league: Bangur, Scindia, Bhiwandiwalla, Kirloskar, Walchand, Modi, Sarabhai, Macneil and Magor, Lalbhai and ICI. Some of them have become extinct or have been bought up by others. Some of them have broken up into smaller companies as a result of family feuds or partitioning of assets. On the other hand, new business houses have

moved up into the top 20—the prominent ones being Reliance, Nagarjuna, Abhay Oswal, Mithals, and Ruia (Essar). Others on the threshold include R.P. Goenka, Bajaj, Mallya and ITC. Interestingly, it is the newer groups within this list, like the Mithals, Reliance, Mallya and Nagarjuna, as well as other relatively young business groups in the top 100 list (Ranbaxy, TVS Sundaram, Hero, Onida, Videocon, and so on) who are supporting NEP and hope to globalise their operations. Older business groups like the Modis, Singhanias, Bangurs, Sarabhais, or even Bajaj are simply not equipped to utilise global opportunities or face global competition.

**T**here has been little research into this process. Even less researched is the emergence of new business groups, the first generation entrepreneurs who have moved quickly into the top league. Of the names mentioned above two examples of such first generation business groups are Nagarjuna (Andhra Pradesh) and Hero (Haryana). Other major players in specific industries include Reddy's Laboratories (AP), Ranbaxy (Delhi), Mallya (Karnataka) and TVS (Tamil Nadu).

The available literature on first generation enterprise and the dynamics of capitalist development is largely region-specific, with no attempt being made to relate it to national policies and growth of manufacturing at the all-India level. Thus Berna (1960), Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg (1987), Upadhyay (1988) and Ruttan (1995) have studied capital formation in agriculture and growth of manufacturing in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat respectively. In Baru (1984) we undertook a preliminary analysis of data for Andhra Pradesh on the rural roots of urban business. In Baru (1995) we offered some preliminary hypotheses on the dynamics of enterprise growth in the post-independence period.

Most first generation enterprise is regionally focused and does not as yet have a 'national' outlook or stake, as indeed is the case with big business houses. Interestingly, most such groups have preferred to lobby the government

through regional political parties rather than invest in national parties. Thus while traditional big business has moved from funding the Congress to funding the BJP and the latter has emerged as the political vehicle of metropolitan big business (mainly marwari enterprise), new business groups like the Kammas and Rajus of A.P., the Vokkaligas and Lingayats of Karnataka, the Chettiars of Tamil Nadu and so on have invested in regional political parties. In Maharashtra, sugar-cane growers organised into millers' cooperatives have been important regional capitalists with strong links to local politicians with changing party political loyalties. In Gujarat, an important base of business enterprise for nearly a century, distinction will now have to be made between those Gujarati-Jain-Marwari business groups which already have a national presence and constitute an important segment of national big business, and the first generation entrepreneurs with links into agriculture and external trade (non-resident and expatriate Gujaratis).

**T**he basic difference between traditional big business and the new entrepreneurial groups seems to be that the former was able to acquire greater control over the levers of the old 'licence-permit raj', and thereby access to national political parties, first the Congress and now the BJP. The latter have also gained from the old dirigiste model of development in as much as they were able to accumulate capital within the old system, in agriculture, trade, public projects and so on, but their growth may have been constrained by the licence-permit raj. It is such groups which have not only aggressively campaigned for an end to the old system, but have also been less worried about foreign collaborations and production for the export market, often in collaboration with foreign partners.

It is no coincidence that the most dynamic exporters from the manufacturing sector come from small enterprise, while traditional big business has largely focused its attention on the home market to the relative neglect of exports. Second,



these new groups have been active in emerging areas like electronics, pharmaceuticals and health care, food processing (including sugar), textiles and garments, chemicals and petrochemicals, cement, liquor and beverages, hotels, and now power and telecom.

**O**ne can appreciate the significance of the process being discussed from even a cursory look at the development of manufacturing activity in Andhra Pradesh, a state with which I am more familiar. Consider the following illustrative examples:

**Nagarjuna Group:** K.V.K. Raju – caste: Raju, rich peasant, professional. Studies engineering and joined Union Carbide (USA). Quit UC to set up own company. Toured the Krishn district (AP) extensively to raise funds from Raju/Kamma farmers. With individual contributions ranging from Rs 50,000 to Rs 500,000 accumulated enough to create a corpus for the equity part of investment in Nagarjuna Fertilisers. Leveraged these funds to raise equity and debt capital from public sector financial institutions. Foreign collaboration with Snamprogetti (Italy)–Rajiv Gandhi link, useful in securing clearances from GOI. Branched out into chemicals, electronics, cement, finance, power.

**Reddy's Labs:** Dr Anji Reddy – caste: Reddy. Professional. Scientist in Indian Drugs and Pharmaceuticals Ltd. – PSU. Quit company, copied technology and set up own facility. Exported Ibuprofen. Attacked by US companies with patent violation. Made distinction between process and product patent – classic example cited during TRIPS discussions. Won law suits in US courts. Major exporter of bulk drugs. Manufacturing base established in China. Raised US \$50 million through ADRs.

**G.V.K. Group:** G.V. Krishna Reddy – caste: Reddy. Rich peasant, contractor. Accumulated capital as a civil works contractor. Branched out into real estate, hotels and now into power in collaboration with a US multinational.

**Ramoji Rao** – caste: Kamma. Rich peasant. Origins in chit funds. Branched out into hotels, food processing, newspa-

pers, films, ship-breaking and satellite television.

**Standard Organics:** Dayakar Reddy – Professional, began in pharmaceuticals, branched out into health care.

One can prepare a longer list of such businessmen for Andhra Pradesh and an even longer one for states like Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. From the Punjab in the north, down the western coastline and along the Coromandel coast, emerging Indian enterprise is enveloping the backward inland regions along an inverted J-curve. Apart from seeking a change in economic policy, a redefinition of the relationship between business and government, this new enterprise may also be reshaping the politics of the country.

Consider, for example, the failed attempt of the Bharatiya Janata Party to form a government in New Delhi in May 1996. The BJP's failure was not for want of support from the nation's power elite. Indeed, Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta based big business went out of its way to help the BJP. Not only was the national media, dominated by pro-BJP marwari and upper caste business families, pressed into the party's service but even the stock market reflected a pro-BJP sentiment, going up on the day Vajpayee was sworn in the Prime Minister and going down the day he lost the vote of confidence. The financial backing the BJP received from the traditional big business was unparalleled, since rarely has Indian business invested so heavily in an opposition political party. When Vajpayee's inability to secure a majority had sent the stock market into a tizzy, many pro-BJP commentators argued that Indian business was getting nervous about the formation of a United Front government.

**T**hrough all this, the regional parties which came together to form the UF, secured unstinted support from regional business groups in their respective states. Thus, many influential businessmen in Andhra Pradesh remained steadfast in their support for the TDP faction led by Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu. In Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, local busi-

nessmen openly supported the DMK, TMC and the Janata Dal. For too long had businessmen of southern Indian wasted their resources trying to influence national political parties like the Congress and the BJP into adopting policies that would directly benefit them. The time had come to strike out on one's own and strengthen a regional party which, they hoped, would nurture the dried roots of Indian federalism. The decentralisation of economic policy that we now witness is a response to such pressures.

**W**hen militancy began in the Punjab, several commentators had argued at the time that it was not the backwardness of the Punjab but rather its impressive development that fuelled the pro-Khalistani movement. While economic backwardness had fuelled separatist movements across the country, ranging from the secessionist movements of the North East to demands for separate statehood in Telangana, Vidarbha, Uttarakhand, and so on, in the Punjab, separatism was fed by the growing urge of a developed region to cut loose and better enjoy the fruits of development. While it would be simplistic and incorrect to say that a similar sentiment is taking root in other developed states, the fact remains that the developed regions of the country as well as the economically and socially better-off sections of society are beginning to wonder why they should be constrained by the burden of backwardness of the nation as a whole.

Much like professional Indians who want to migrate and work in the more hospitable and rewarding environment of the developed West, the developed regions of the subcontinent, and more importantly the more dynamic entrepreneurial groups in these regions, are no longer willing to be constrained by the dead weight of the past. Neither are they meekly willing to accept a policy regime in which corporate dinosaurs are protected at the expense of the more agile and fleet-footed business species.

Unlike traditional business groups which have not succeeded in remaining competitive and are worried about taking on the challenge of global competition,

the younger and more dynamic business groups have been able to strike out and test their merit in the world marketplace. It is not surprising that while traditional business groups can only boast of an odd Aditya Birla who chose to go global, the new business groups have in their ranks the likes of Parvinder Singh's Ranbaxy and Anji Reddy's Reddy's Labs, which have already gone global.

The dynamics of India's politics and business in the coming decade will increasingly depend on the pace and pattern of development of the more dynamic regions of the country. Confronting the development Cassandras who had convinced themselves that backward, populous, post-colonial India was condemned to 'retarded capitalism', backwardness and dependency, the region along the more dynamic 'J' has shown that capitalist development, albeit uneven and with a heavy dose of state support and subsidy, is possible and happening. Admittedly, uneven capitalist development will bring with it its own set of political and social problems and challenges, but that is another story.

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## India's external sector

BIBEK DEBROY

THIS paper takes stock of India's external sector after the introduction of economic reforms in 1991. The first section sketches out the anatomy of the crisis that triggered the reforms. The second section is on the reform agenda. The third section primarily questions official pronouncements on the success of the reforms. And the fourth and final section argues that the balance of payments is manageable, although there continue to be reasons for concern.

Why were reforms introduced in 1991? There are several levels at which this question can be answered. One is that of the short term liquidity crisis that India faced in the external sector in 1990-91. The balance of payments came under severe pressure. It is perfectly understandable that a developing country like India

will have a deficit on the balance of trade account. Exports are difficult to push up. Imports are essential and cannot be reduced without seriously affecting investments and growth rates. The issue therefore is: how will this deficit on the balance of trade account be financed?

In the 1980s, India financed a large chunk of the balance of trade deficit through a surplus on the net invisibles account. This primarily meant remittances from Indian workers settled abroad, chiefly in the Middle East. But there was a gradual decline in net receipts. As interest rates on India's borrowing went up, there was a sharp increase in net payments on the 'investment income' account. Because of this, the net receipts from invisibles progressively went down. As the contribution of net invisibles to financing the trade deficit decreased, there was an increased dependence on inflows of external capital. However, flows of concessional assistance from the World Bank group had gone down and the terms of debt service obligations had also hardened. Especially since 1984-85, inflows of capital were often through commercial borrowing and deposits by non-resident Indians (NRIs). In September 1990, the Gulf War led to a sharp increase in the prices of petroleum and related products. Apart from leading to an increase in the cost of POL (petroleum-oil-lubricants) imports, the war had an adverse impact on the flow of remittances into India. The Gulf War also led to some loss in exports to West Asia.

**I** nflows into non-resident accounts included the non-resident external rupee (NRER) accounts and the foreign currency non-resident (FCNR) accounts. The growth rate in NRER deposits began to slacken in 1985-86 and there was even a net outflow in subsequent years. The rupee depreciated rapidly in the second half of the 1980s. The NRER deposits were in rupees and not protected against rupee depreciation. It was therefore natural that they should be withdrawn. Since October 1990, the FCNR deposits also began to register a net outflow.

Borrowing on the external capital market depends crucially on the confidence of the international financial community in India's ability to service debts. And this depends on the ratings that India obtains from international credit rating agencies. In 1986, India's credit rating was high. By March 1991, the credit rating had slipped to the bottom of the investment grade. In April 1991, Standard and Poor downgraded India to the BB category, the speculative grade. Moody's, the other major credit rating agency, refrained from placing India in the speculative grade, but downgraded the rating nonetheless. What this meant was that it became exceedingly difficult for India to resort to external commercial borrowing. Much of the external commercial borrowing the country went in for in the second half of the 1980s, was on a short-term basis. The short term debt tended to be rolled over every 180 days and the crisis came when banks refused to continue with the system after India's credit rating was downgraded.

**T** he problems were thus stark enough: A decline in net receipts from invisibles; Fall in remittances from Iraq and Kuwait; Increased cost of POL imports; Withdrawal of NRER and FCNR funds; External commercial borrowing not available. Foreign exchange reserves went down to US\$ 1 billion in January 1991 – enough to sustain a fortnight's imports. The immediate problem therefore was one of managing the liquidity problem in the external sector. Thus, in 1990-91, India came very close to defaulting on external debt obligations. As the country has an impeccable record in repaying external debt, it was psychologically important that there be no default.

In addition to managing the short term liquidity problem in the external sector, there was a long term diagnosis as well – that there was something fundamentally wrong with the Indian economy. And if structural adjustments and economic reforms did not correct this long term problem, there would be a recurrence of short term crises every now and then. It was therefore not enough to tide over

the liquidity crisis faced in 1990-91; a deeper process of economic reforms was necessary.

Part of this long term diagnosis was in terms of cross-country comparisons. There was a perception that cross-country experiences showed that India had perhaps committed an error in the choice of a development policy. If one looks back at our developmental experience over the last 49 years, there are many aspects that we can justifiably be proud of.

Per capita gross national product (GNP) grew by around 1.4% over the period 1950-80, with a growth rate of around 3.1% over the period 1980-92. In the first three decades the economy grew by about 3.5% per year, with a growth rate of 5.2% over the period 1980-92. A fairly diversified industrial base was set up and self-sufficiency in food grains had been attained. The percentage of people below the poverty line had come down over the years. These are all standard economic indicators. But non-economic indicators that measure welfare or the physical quality of life also show improvements. Life expectancy at birth has gone up from 44 years in 1960 to 61 years in 1992. Infant mortality rates have declined from 165 in 1960 to 79 in 1992. The adult literacy rate has gone up from 34% in 1970 to 51% now.

**B** ut this performance pales into insignificance when compared with what some economies in East Asia have achieved. Cross-country comparisons show a less than satisfactory economic performance. And this is true not only of pure economic indicators, but of non-economic ones as well. A logical deduction immediately follows. Perhaps, as compared to these other countries, India's developmental policy was not quite appropriate. An issue that is often debated is whether the experience of small countries like Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea can be replicated in India. But Indonesia and China are not small countries. Therefore the argument that replication is not possible, cannot be taken seriously.

Apart from making cross-country comparisons, the long term diagnosis can also be expressed in terms of internal developments. This diagnosis has been articulated by several Indian economists since the late 1970s. It has also been reflected in a large number of government committee reports—the Tandon Committee, Alexander Committee, Dagli Committee and Abid Hussain Committee are examples. Stated somewhat simplistically, the long term diagnosis was the following.

In the late 1950s, India embarked on a policy of import-substituting industrialization and inward orientation. There was no attempt to promote exports and no outward orientation of the economy. It is no one's case that the strategy adopted in the late 1950s was wrong; rather that India persisted with this model through the 1970s and the 1980s, even when it was increasingly clear that it had become irrelevant. Its benefits did not justify the costs associated with it. As a result of import-substituting industrialization, industrial capacity was set up and infant industry clamoured for protection. And industry was protected from all external competition through a complicated import licensing regime and extremely high tariff rates. Industry was also protected from domestic competition through the industrial licensing policy. Consequently, the domestic market was protected and profitable.

**T**his policy had three undesirable effects. First, since the domestic market was protected and profitable and the international market was competitive, Indian industry had no need to export. There was a policy-induced anti-export bias and a distortion towards catering to the domestic market. Second, industry had no incentive to upgrade technology, reduce costs or improve efficiency. The domestic market continued to be profitable even if these changes were not brought about. But exports and foreign exchange receipts were necessary to pay for essential imports. This led to a third undesirable consequence. A complicated system of export incentives had to be

introduced to ensure the survival of inefficient Indian industry in the tough and competitive international market. It is this vicious circle that the economic reforms seek to break.

**H**aving outlined the rationale for the introduction of reforms, let us now sketch the essential ingredients of a process of economic reforms. Let us first talk about the external sector, since that is the focus of the paper. Thereafter, somewhat cursorily, we will mention domestic economic policies.

Prior to 1991, the exchange rate of the rupee was administered, that is, set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). This resulted in an over-valued rupee which made exports artificially expensive and imports artificially cheap. There was thus a policy-induced pressure on the balance of trade. And multiple exchange rates or import licensing are necessary to ensure that the implied balance of trade deficit is suppressed, and does not become open.

To eliminate this problem there was a devaluation of the rupee by about 20% in 1991. Subsequently, the system of determining the rupee's value went through various regimes that are now only of historical interest. At present the value of the rupee is determined in the market, although the market is still a restricted one.

In the process, several exchange control regulations have been done away with and the rupee is on its way towards becoming a convertible currency, at least on the current account. Stated differently, India has accepted the Article VIII obligations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This does not quite mean that the rupee is a convertible currency on the current account yet, as some exchange controls on current account transactions continue. However, there is some sort of a time frame for making the rupee convertible on the current account, probably by 1997-98.

Tariff rates in India tended to be very high before the reforms. These have been brought down in successive budgets and the average (trade weighted) tariff rate is now around 26.5%, with a peak tariff

rate of 50%. By 1997, it is proposed to bring down average tariff levels to around 25%, as set out for example in the recommendations of the Chelliah Committee. In principle, tariff levels should be lowest for raw materials, medium for intermediates and highest for finished goods. This was not always the case and some rationalization in rates has taken place to attain this objective. Around 1998, one will probably have a tariff rate of 10% on raw materials, 15% on intermediates and 25% on finished goods.

**A**part from high tariffs, there was also a complicated import licensing regime. Broadly speaking, imports were divided into four categories – banned or prohibited items, restricted items (for which licences were necessary), items on open general licence (OGL, for which no licences were necessary) and canalized items (which could only be imported through selected state trading organizations). Canalization is gradually being dispensed with, and the lists of banned and restricted items are being progressively pruned. The idea is that only a few items will be on the banned list while everything else will be on open general licence. If such imports are to be discouraged, that is best done through tariffs, not through quantitative restrictions. If one looks at the remaining quantitative restrictions on imports, they tend to be pervasive only for consumer goods. Some of these have, however, been liberalised through the special import licence (SIL) route, while other consumer goods have been directly placed on the OGL list.

Similarly, there was a licensing regime for exports as well. As in the case of imports, there were items which were banned for export, others required licences, and still others were canalized. In certain other cases there were minimum export price requirements. Decanalization of export products has been underway. Eventually all export items (except a small negative list) should be freely exportable. The system of minimum export prices should also go.

Prior to 1991, a complicated system of export subsidies existed, which tended



to vary from sector to sector. Sector-specific export subsidies have now been dispensed with, barring a few marginal instances. And whatever export incentives are available are uniform across the board, with no discrimination across sectors.

**E**arlier there was a great deal of reluctance to permit foreign direct investments (FDI) into the country. The policy has now been made more liberal and pragmatic. This is not merely because of the traditional two-gap model of FDI plugging a foreign exchange gap and a savings-investment gap. There is also an explicit recognition of marketing considerations, typified in the fact that two-thirds of global trade flows today tend to be intra-industry trade flows. Moreover, unlike borrowing, the costs of FDI only have to be met when the venture is successful and makes profits. Foreign direct investment proposals in 36 'high priority' sectors are now automatically approved, provided that the proposed foreign equity participation is not more than 51%. If a larger foreign equity is involved, or if the proposed investment is in sectors other than the designated high priority ones, approvals have to be obtained from the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB). The FIPB has been fairly liberal in granting these approvals. Before the economic reforms, FDI inflows into India used to average around US \$150 million a year. In 1995-96, it is estimated that about \$2.5 billion worth of actual inflows came in. Approvals are much greater, with inflows amounting to around 25% of approvals. For 1996-97, the government hopes to attract \$4 billion worth of FDI inflows and the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) visualises annual FDI inflows of 10 billion.

Many of these investments are in the consumer goods sector, in which foreign direct investments were previously not encouraged. This is understandable since this sector continues to be highly protected. Moreover, since investments in infrastructure areas require larger investments and longer time frames over which the investments can be recouped,

foreign direct investments in consumer goods are also linked to perceptions about the continuity of economic reforms in India.

The Narasimham Committee's report on financial restructuring recommended that Indian capital markets should be thrown open to foreign institutional investments (FIIs). These recommendations were implemented in September 1992 with the guidelines announced for FIIs broadly mirroring the portfolio investment scheme for NRIs. The guidelines are fairly liberal, although they still compare unfavourably with the incentive structures in other countries. Nevertheless, FII inflows into India have increased dramatically.

**E**xternal sector reforms cannot be considered in isolation from reforms in the domestic economy. The domestic economy presents a very broad canvas. The major strands of reforms, if one includes the domestic economy, are the following.

- i) Eliminate quantitative restrictions on exports and imports.
- ii) Bring down and rationalize tariffs, eliminate export subsidies, so that trade policy is neutral and equates the effective exchange rate for exports to the effective exchange rate for imports.
- iii) Eliminate over-valuation in exchange rates and make the exchange rate market-determined.
- iv) Reform the public sector through disinvestment or through leasing and management contracts. In any case, eliminate public sector monopolies and introduce greater competition.
- v) Break down segmentation in labour markets and link wages to productivity.
- vi) Reform monetary policy and transit to market-determined interest rates, reform the financial sector.
- vii) Bring down budgetary deficits, target government subsidies better and reform the tax structure so that indirect taxes become more transparent. Simultaneously bring down rates of direct taxation while broadening the base.
- viii) Remove barriers to entry and exit in industry.

ix) Reform the agricultural sector by making output and input prices market-determined.

x) Target government expenditure on primary health, primary education and the development of infrastructure. Introduce social safety nets as protection against the effects of structural adjustments.

**O**n reading the *Economic Survey 1995-96*, one cannot but appreciate the positive developments in the Indian economy since 1991. However, this is a bit strange. Although reforms in the external sector cannot really be delinked from those in the domestic economy, it is true that the success of reforms has been much more pronounced in the external sector. In fact, it is in the external sector that reforms have actually been introduced. Barring industrial delicensing and some amount of tinkering with capital markets, no significant reforms have yet been worked out in the domestic economy. This is the reason why the official survey sounds off key. Wonderful things have happened to the economy without reforms being introduced.

What does the *Economic Survey 1995-96* have to say? The reforms have led to a revival of economic growth, rapid expansion of productive employment, a reduction of poverty, a substantial boom in exports and a marked decline in inflation. Growth of real GDP (gross domestic product) at factor cost was 0.8% in 1991-92. But growth accelerated to 6.3% in 1994-95 and is projected at 6.2% in 1995-96. The industrial sector has been growing at around 12% per year. Savings as a percentage of GDP have gone up to a record high of 24.4%. The inflation rate, measured by the wholesale price index (WPI) has gone down to 4.3%. The percentage of the population below the poverty line has declined to 19%. There have been an estimated 7.2 million new jobs in 1994-95. For the first time since 1947 the number of new jobs created has exceeded the number of new entrants to the labour force.

It is useful to put matters in perspective. It must be borne in mind that 1991-92 was a year of crisis. Any comparison

with 1991-92 therefore exaggerates the performance of the Indian economy in 1995-96. The test ought to be whether there has been a sharp break with past trends. But that doesn't seem to have been the case. GDP may have grown by 0.8% in 1991-92, but throughout the decade of the 1980s, GDP grew at a rate of 5.5%. Is 6.2% all that different from 5.5%? In fact, in the second half of the 1980s, GDP grew at a rate of 5.8%. Throughout the 1980s, industrial growth may not have touched 10%, but it did grow by 8%. In 1987-88, exports grew by 24.1% in dollar terms, followed by growth rates of 15.6% and 18.9% in the next two years.

**M**uch the same can be said about the savings rate of 24.4%. Till 1993-94, when the savings rate stagnated at 21.4%, the *Economic Survey* and government documents adopted two separate strands of reasoning. The first was to question the statistical methodology used to arrive at savings figures. The second was to argue that despite a stagnant savings rate, higher rates of GDP growth were possible because of an improvement in the capital/output ratio. Now that the savings rate seems to have gone up to 24.4%, what is one to make of these arguments?

Or consider the dysfunctional debate over the poverty figures. It is possible to quibble about data and methodology that show a mere 19% of the Indian population to be below the poverty line. But this has nothing to do with reforms, except in so far as stabilisation measures have had an adverse impact on poverty due to a decline in public spending. The decline in poverty preceded the reforms and is part of a temporal trend. The bulk of poverty is in any case concentrated in the rural areas and this type of poverty is essentially dependent on agricultural production. India has had a succession of eight good monsoons. Apart from some increase in the procurement and minimum support prices, there have been no reforms in the agricultural sector. Even if the terms of trade have moved a bit in favour of agriculture, public investment in agriculture has not increased.

It is therefore unrealistic to expect that reforms could have made a dent on rural poverty, or even on overall poverty. The trickle down effects of growth on poverty and unemployment do not start until the economy begins to grow at more than 8% a year on a sustained basis. This is what the reforms were expected to do. But as mentioned earlier, the evidence that the economy has moved to a higher growth path is suspect. This is not surprising, since necessary reforms in the domestic economy have not been introduced.

Employment is a case in point. The reforms had promised to make growth more employment intensive. In the second half of the 1980s, employment increased at around 5 million a year and if one accepts the figure of 7.2 million, there does seem to have been a sharp increase. However, it is unlikely that this is a result of a direct fallout of the reforms. Indirectly reforms have stimulated unorganised sector production. If flexible labour markets in the unorganised sector can ensure this kind of employment generation, imagine what would happen if labour market reforms were indeed carried out and labour markets made more flexible.

**T**he figures for inflation also exhibit no sharp break with the past. If one ignores 1991-92, the trend rate of inflation was around 8.5%. If anything, the inflation rate, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and not the WPI, has been marginally higher in the post-reform period. A break with past trends will require substantial supply side or demand-side changes and there is no evidence that either of these has happened. The recent growth is perhaps more sustainable, but only just. For the entire seventh plan period, the average fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP was 8.2%. 6% is considerably lower, but it is a far cry from the 3.5% that was originally talked about.

The reforms can be judged on two counts: (a) do they mark a break with past trends; and (b) have they succeeded in overcoming the short term liquidity crisis in the external sector? As we have just argued, the answer to (a) is in the nega-

tive because the required reforms have not been introduced. It is worth mentioning that the growth successes of 1994-95 and 1995-96 are unlikely to be replicated in 1996-97 and there are signs of a downturn. Even if recession is too strong a word to use, the fact of a downturn cannot be denied. This is essentially related to two factors. First, an infrastructural constraint. Second, problems with the availability and cost of credit. Both these constraints underline the lack of reforms in the domestic economy.

**T**he answer to whether the reforms have succeeded in overcoming short term liquidity in the external sector becomes somewhat clear from the accompanying table, which is a balance of payments (bop) statement.

	1990-91	1993-94	1995-96
Exports	18.5	22.7	32.4
Imports	27.9	24.0	39.4
Trade Balance	-9.4	-1.3	-7.0
Net Invisibles	-0.2	1.0	1.9
Current Account	-9.7	-0.3	-5.1
External Assistance	2.2	1.7	1.0
Commercial Borrowing	2.2	1.3	0.01
IMF	1.2	0.2	-1.7
NRI Deposits	1.5	0.9	1.4
Rupee Debt Service	-1.2	-0.7	-1.0
Foreign Investment	0.1	4.1	4.1
Other Flows	2.3	1.7	-1.7
Capital Account	8.4	9.0	2.2
Reserve Use	1.3	-8.9	2.9

All figures are in billion US dollars

The figures show the following. Imports have been increasing at a fairly sharp rate (subject to the caveat that non-oil imports have slowed down in 1996-97). This is not necessarily a bad thing, since the composition of imports shows that import growth is linked to faster rates of industrial growth. Exports have also been growing. In 1996-97, there is evidence of both export growth and import growth slackening, primarily because of infrastructural constraint and credit problems mentioned earlier. We will come back to this point later. However, regardless of the actual export figure, the point is that the balance of trade deficit is widening. Despite the marginal

surplus on the net invisibles account, this means a current account deficit of at least 5.5 billion in 1996-97.

Such a current account deficit as a percentage of GDP is not unduly large, it amounts to around 1.5% of GDP. Anything upto 2% of GDP ought to be sustainable. It is possible to argue this from a different angle as well. Much has been made of India's external debt of \$99 billion in March 1995, which made it the third most indebted country in the world after Brazil and Mexico. (In March 1996, the debt declined to 92 billion.) But this is the debt stock. More important from the point of view of deciding whether the debt is manageable or not, are flows, such as debt service payments, both interest and principal repayments, expressed as a percentage of current account receipts. The government's avowed intention is to bring down the debt service ratio to 20% by the turn of the century.

**I**n 1993-94, India's debt/GDP ratio was 36.9% and this was also a period during which the rupee would have appreciated had the RBI not intervened. India also added to foreign exchange reserves in 1993-94. It can therefore be argued that a debt/GDP ratio of 36.9% is sustainable. Projections for GDP growth have now been scaled down and it may not grow by more than 5.5%, given infrastructural constraints. A continued debt/GDP ratio of 36.9% thus means that debt should not grow at more than 5.5%. A sustainable incremental change in debt over GDP ratio is therefore 2.03%. If there are no foreign exchange reserves to draw upon and no non-debt creating capital inflows like FDI, this ratio is nothing but the current account deficit as a percentage of GDP. A current account deficit/GDP ratio of 2% should therefore be sustainable and we are unlikely to significantly exceed this benchmark.

However, the current account deficit needs to be financed. And the point, as contrasted with 1993-94, is that the capital account surplus is declining. FDI inflows do not react instantaneously to a process of economic reforms and we have not done enough to attract FDI. We may

not even get the \$4 billion inflow expected for 1996-97. The overall bop surplus or deficit is thus still extremely sensitive to FII inflows. If FII inflows slacken, an overall deficit will have to be financed. Foreign exchange reserves have climbed from the trough of \$1 billion in 1991 to around 18 billion now, but it is not enough to continuously sustain an underlying bop disequilibrium. This will result in a depreciating rupee. However, as often happens, the exchange rate is perceived to be a matter of national pride rather than a price. To stem a depreciation, it is therefore tempting to throw open the lid on external commercial borrowings. This means a hike in the debt service ratio, perhaps to 1990-91 levels.

Stated differently, the bop situation may not be as precarious as it was in 1990-91. But the fact remains that there is a messy bop management exercise that has to be performed. And the possibility of a recurrence of the 1990-91 type of syndrome is not all that implausible, which means another bop crisis one year down the line. In a perverse sense that is perhaps desirable as it is only when there is an actual crisis that we become serious about reforming the economy.

**I**n addition to a bop management problem, concerns have been expressed about a slowdown in the rate of export growth. A high rate of growth in the dollar value of exports was the big success story of the reforms and was used in the argument that the external sector does respond to policy changes. Despite the Reserve Bank Governor talking about an export growth rate of 15-17% in dollar terms in 1996-97, exports are stuck. A rate of growth of more than 12% in dollar terms seems unlikely. The target of \$38 billion in 1996-97 is now impossible, and this is also true of the target of 75 billion by the turn of the century.

There are several reasons for the export slowdown, not all of which are equally important. First, there is the spectre of global recession which is the government's favourite scapegoat. Global trade is expected to grow at 5% this year, as compared to 7-8% last year. For

a country that accounts for 0.6% of world exports, demand conditions cannot be that important. Recession and a slowdown in global demand may have had sector-specific impacts, such as for gems and jewellery or readymade garments. But this is at best, a partial answer.

Second, it is argued that as the export figure goes up, the base becomes higher. Therefore, higher rates of growth are more difficult to sustain. There is some validity in this argument. However, the base is not high enough for this argument to explain a slowdown from 20-25% in dollar terms to 12%. Moreover, this argument is a bit of a red herring. Stated differently, the argument is that Indian exports face severe supply-side constraints. These constraints do not bite as long as the base is low. But once the base is higher, the constraints become binding. Thus, taken to its logical conclusion, this argument really highlights the presence of supply side constraints.

Third, it is argued that exports are always sluggish towards the beginning of the financial year and pick up towards the second half. As a factual proposition, this is indeed true. But it doesn't explain the slowdown. The figures available are month on month figures, they compare export figures of August 1995 with those of August 1996. Therefore, the seasonal fluctuation across the year has nothing to do with the slowdown as represented in these month on month figures.

**F**ourth, one talks of infrastructural constraints such as power shortages, non-availability of wagons, bottlenecks in ports and inadequate containerisation facilities. After all, containerisation costs in India are estimated to be three to four times those prevailing in the United States or Japan. In 1995-96, when exports of non-basmati rice took off, ports like Kandla and Vizag were completely clogged and ships had to wait for three months to load or unload. One cannot dispute the importance of infrastructure as a constraint, but we have always lived with this problem. Why should it suddenly become important and begin to bite in 1996-97?

Fifth, are complaints about customs procedures. Export procedures have been somewhat simplified. However, import procedures continue to be horrendous and many exports require export-related imports. The trouble with this argument is that antiquated customs procedures have also been around for a long time. Why should they suddenly become a severe constraint in 1996-97?

Sixth, is the imposition of a minimum tax on exporters. It is not entirely clear what the quantitative impact of this tax has been. Very few of the 300,000 exporters will eventually end up paying. And even for those who pay, the effective tax rate is unlikely to be more than 12.5%. In a climate of liberalisation it is impossible to defend special treatment for exporters. Therefore, exemptions like 80HHC eventually must go. The question, however, relates to the timing. While one cannot question the principles behind the minimum tax, its imposition is mistimed. Psychologically, the tax couldn't have come at a worse time from the perspective of export growth.

**T**he seventh reason – the credit problem – is equally important. This has not only hurt export growth but has affected industrial growth as well. One symptom of this is the slowdown in import growth. There are two aspects to the credit problem, the cost of credit and its availability. On the cost, what is the rate of inflation in India? If one discounts the wholesale price index (WPI) as misleading, the inflation rate is probably around 10%. This implies a real rate of interest of at least 8%. In a capital scarce country, the real rate of interest is unlikely to be as low as global interest rates. But despite this, 8% is simply too high. In reforming the financial sector, it is not enough to free interest rates alone. Unless directed credit programmes are reformed simultaneously, the rate of interest becomes exorbitant. 10% of bank funds are pre-empted as a cash reserve ratio (CRR) requirement. 25% are formally pre-empted through statutory liquidity ratio (SLR) requirements and there is a further 10% SLR requirement imposed informally. On top of 45%, another 30%

of bank funds are preempted through directed credit programmes. Since this is the case, how can interest rates come down?

Independent of costs, the availability of credit has also been a problem. Bank deposits have been growing, but banks have been unwilling to lend. The requirement that non-performing assets (NPAs) have to be under control means that banks find it tempting to buy government paper instead. Scam-tainted public sector banks also have the mind-set of risk aversion, which translates into not lending. The credit problem has probably been the single most important reason behind the export slowdown.

**E**ighth, the real exchange rate has appreciated somewhat, probably by about 2% in 1996-97. (This is not entirely obvious from rupee/dollar exchange rates, since the dollar has also appreciated vis-a-vis major international currencies.) Since a market-determined exchange rate is influenced by capital flows as well as purchasing power parity (PPP) type of considerations, the real appreciation is not surprising. 2% is perhaps not significant enough to bite yet. But since India's exports are in the low value segments, they are extremely price sensitive. Therefore, any real appreciation hurts exports. This is a factor that might increasingly become important as the year progresses.

Ninth, there are sector specific problems. An obvious example is leather exports. These have been hard hit by the Supreme Court directive to close 250 major tanneries in Tamil Nadu.

None of these problems can be solved overnight. As mentioned, a high growth rate of exports was a success story of the reforms. It is now clear that the euphoria over this success should be more muted. It also needs to be noted that the constraints to export growth also highlight the need for further reforms in the domestic economy. One cannot introduce reforms in the external sector alone and expect exports to take off. This obvious fact needs to be appreciated without waiting for another external sector crisis to precipitate events.



# May day, May day

SHIV VISVANATHAN

THE beauty of language is the way it surprises and ambushes one with multiple meanings. The same word means different things to different people. In the socialist world, May Day is sacrosanct. It is a moment of celebration for trade unions across the world. May Day! as a scream is a cry for help, the universal signal of distress. Trade unions today operate between the world of May Day I and May Day II, between celebration and signals for help. This essay is an attempt to bridge the two.

With the coming of liberalization and globalization, our trade unions have become strangely silent, even anonymous. One hears questions about productivity, new styles of management, industrial estates, silicon valleys, no-more-Bhopals but the trade union appears as an absence in all these theaters. There is a sense of void, a pathos, an illiteracy. Trade unions are virtually in mourning, either literally as for Shankar Guha Neogi or symbolically for their lack of revolutionary impetus. However, revolutions are not the only form of dynamism, nor *gheraos* the only sign of muscle. There is a need for a different kind of creativity. But such a creativity in politics needs an intellectual redefinition.

Years ago, Karl Marx wrote, 'Philosophers have only reinterpreted the world. Our duty is to change it.' Marx was only objecting to the esoteric and abstract nature of the philosophy of his time. But if he were here today, he would have realized that the poverty of trade unionism stems from the poverty of its philosophy. Change can only come if trade unionists also become philosophers; only by reinterpreting their positions in the global world can they change it. Such change, we realize, has to bridge both the epic and the everyday.

\* This paper is part of a series of essays to be published by the Centre for Mutual Learning (CML) project, Floating the Commons

Trade unions have been defined as formal organizations. In the very act of such a definition they become subject to a captive text, a bounded discourse. Often a sociology of organizations treats organizations like machines. It gives them tasks, projects, missions, so much so that a trade union looks more like a rocket than a community. Trade unions are not only visualized like machines which need to be revamped but are seen as mechanical, i.e. bureaucratic and mechanical in thought, i.e. ideological. Since philosophy begins in mystery and wonder, a philosophy for trade unions must begin by bracketing the notion of the trade union. We must ask again: What is work? Who is a worker? What kind of working does a trade union represent? And what is the nature of this representation? Once we begin as philosophers, trade unions escape the captive text of price, wages, productivity and labour commitment. A trade union that *only* thinks in these categories is doomed to being a poor second or third in a capitalist global society. In this sense they get condemned to the myth of unhappy consciousness and are saddled with the discontented worker in a joyless economy.

Let us stay with the obvious, the dictionary. The OED defines a trade union as 'an association of workers in any trade for the protection and furtherance of their interests in regard to their wages, hours, conditions of labour and for the provision for their common funds, of pecuniary assistance to their members during strikes, sickness, unemployment, old age'. Lovely. Only, it is the silences that are deafening.

Fundamental to the trade union is the model of the factory. Intrinsic also to this is a politics of carving spaces. There is first the separation between home and work; second there is a distinction between organized and unorganized labour. That is, work in the domestic domain or work by unorganized workers

is not officially a trade union domain. Such a definition ignores women's work in most societies as also work not modeled on the factory or the bureaucracy. In a deep and fundamental way domestic work, women's work and children's work appear alien or pathological.

Second, by concentrating on wages, hours and conditions of work, we get caught in the everyday idiom of capitalism, of money, time and productivity. The need to dream of utopias, of places where we are free to hunt, fish and write poetry gets shifted to the domain of leisure. The meaning of work somehow becomes diffuse and the logic of work gets reduced to the logic of time and motion studies. Third, even if one engages in such a critique, it is more often in terms of an ideology rather than a worldview. Ideologies are doctrinaire, rigid, formulaic, rhetorical. Worldviews connect in wider ways and allow for the ethical, the poetic, the nonsensical to massage out the doctrines of political economy.

**F**inally the dyadic relationship with management is visualized in terms of master and slave, but within a limited dialectic. It is the logic of conflict management, revolution, general strike, collective bargaining, embourgeoisement or submission. The ideas of muddling through, of reciprocity, of inventiveness, experimentation, tentativeness get underplayed. Whether one reads Drucker, Taylor or Lenin, one suffers from their puritan primness. What one misses is laughter, joy or even a sense of the carnivalesque. We forget that trade unions can be tricksters, the jokers in the pack of the project called globalization. But to do that one has to escape the text. We would like to offer a series of suggestions to show how trade unions can invent new roles, new rules, new visions for themselves.

How do we break out of this current definition of bit players? It is by examining clichés and transforming them. One hears again and again that politics is the art of the possible. As an understanding of current politics, this could be adequate, realistic, even Machiavellian. But as an understanding of art, it

is pure bull. It sees art as positivist, even as social realism. Art is about surprises; it is about the impossible. If politics is to be an art form, trade unions must be playfully impossible, because the impossible is only what tomorrow brings. By wishing away the impossible, one pre-empts the future, the variety of possibilities open to unionism. To fight oppression one can't cage oneself. One must break windows or at least look through them. One can't fight oppression with oppressive/repressive views of oneself.

**L**et us locate the trade union among the other actors of politics – the party, the NGO, the corporation. There is a vitality to each which the trade unions have lost. Consider the party. There is a vibrancy to politics that needs to be emphasized, an openness to the increasing number of entrants to this space, whether the latest intrusion is the happy Laloo or the shrewd Rajnikanth.

Look at the spoof, the happy irony of it. Laloo more than Narasimha Rao represents the new Indian dream. Forget the texts of the political pundits. They are condemned to bore. Look at the pictures. They are truly worth a thousand words. Laloo *ban gaya* gentleman. Laloo liberating the madman. Laloo as the cowboy. Laloo warning Delhi that he is coming and the people are drooling over him. He is hoodlum, outlaw, party boss, Robin Hood, son of soil. Even Shatrughan Sinha's one-up-manship can't pin the man down. During a recent meeting, Sinha claimed he was Laloo's senior. He was senior to Laloo at Patna College. But in the battle of images, Laloo is the cinematic winner over Shotgun because Laloo has improvised a dream. He is the colonial *mai baap*, the only one who screws Seshan to his sticking place, reminding him that parties, not the Election Commission, are about politics.

In terms of the drama of the imagination, it is not the BJP with the *swadeshi* con and the *rath yatra*, but Laloo with his bawdy politics of upward mobility who has captured the imagination. He is the shotgun of politics. Even Shatrughan Sinha seems to realize it. Those who see

the party as party, i.e. as rigid, cadre-based, or as backroom fixing are out. The Chandrasekhars, the Fernandes and the Narayan Dutt Tiwaris, are fading out. For then, the party is over. For Laloo, the party is only beginning. Even if he goes, he will be replaced by another Laloo. And this is because he sets the terms of discourse. Russi Modi knows it. So does George Fernandes. And the World Bank.

Within such a domain, trade unions have failed to resonate. George Fernandes still thinks he is a part of the European socialist movement. In fact, he makes better sense of Petra Kelly than he does of India. Neogi made sense but was brutally murdered. It is unfortunate that trade unions have not built around such a man. Neogi, like Abdul Bari, will remain an incomplete story. Datta Samant marked the end of the politics of trade unionism. His outrage made sense but he had no vision. As a result, while the Emergency marked the end of the Railways as a great union, the Bombay Strike stamped textiles as a sick industry.

**I**n their moment of helplessness, trade unions must re-look at the role of NGOs today. They are the political, entrepreneurial forces with gigantic budgets active across the spectrum, from political critique to serving as extension counters of the current regime. Compared to the party and the trade unions, NGOs were, to start with, small change. They reflected confusion, anarchy, pluralism, everything that was anathema to the disciplinary grids of the party and the trade union. The Gramscian organic intellectual operates today with greater ease from the grassroots movements than from the party, university or union. In fact, the grassroots groups have served as dissenting academies for the nation, articulating a whole range of issues the big three have been blind to.

Yet the NGOs as a movement working with tribes, marginal peasants, anti-large dam groups cannot do without the party and the union. However, the latter instead of being hospitable and generalizing the specificity of these demands have left these newcomers at the political

threshold. This has led to a depoliticization of both. Environmental groups and human rights activists sound ethical but politically naive. The party and the union appear politically realist but ethically empty. What should have been a happy pollination has made both politically sterile.

**C**ompared to the trade union, even the corporation has been inventive. In terms of the role of technology, the reorganization of the workforce, the corporation has been a remarkably innovative entity. One reason for this is its own self-definition. The modern corporation sees itself as a knowledge producing entity. It is self-consciously theoretical. It sees business as a paradigm that must be continuously reworked. In fact, the modern corporation functions like a micro-paradigm and in a cognitive sense it is closer to Karl Popper's idea of continuous revolution than to Thomas Kuhn's normal science.

If the image of the corporation is that of a theoretical entity, trade unions are still associated with the era of brawn. There is something of the steam engine, of the Manchester of Engels in the trade unions of today. The Taylorization of work has made them even less theoretical. One of the axioms of scientific management is the separation of physical action from theory. And trade unions have succumbed to this in a broader sense. In an attempt to revamp itself, the trade union must be self-consciously theoretical and institutionally inventive. This can only come about if the worker sees himself as a scientist and a philosopher. Without this self-reflexiveness, the trade union will remain a Neanderthal entity, cannon fodder for the party and submissive to management.

The trade union of today is a regressive force, a trifle conservative, even parochial and clerical. How can one change its definition of itself and its environment to improve the odds? One believes this can be done through a set of playful engagements.

Let us borrow a leaf from management thought from the works of Don Schon and Warren Bennis. No shoe com-

pany says it produces shoes. No cloth company merely sells cloth. Liberty says it is about people. Benneton says it is about desire. In fact corporations are systems to make desires come true. As Cadbury would say, it is more than a sweet, it is a food. The corporations' redefinition of themselves as desiring machines is a realization that the statement, a shoe is a shoe is a shoe is false. A cigar might be only a cigar even for Freud, but not the modern corporation. A shoe is a dream, it is desire, it is myth. It is this logic of connections we must adapt. One does not need PR for that. Gandhi's theory of *khadi* would do as well.

For Gandhi, *khadi* was not just *khadi*. It was an invention of community. He claimed that around the *charkha*, a constructive worker could start a revival of the *panchayat*, a malaria eradication programme, a project for the improvement of cattle. *Khadi*, thus, is both system and cosmos. It connects in new ways and it is a theory of invention. In fact it is the only theory of invention that challenges the Schumpeterian and corporate theories of innovation. Gandhi argued that the *charkha* produces community. What does the trade union produce?

**H**igher wages. Job security. What else? To break this typecasting of the trade union, we must reconceptualize work. We must state that it is not only the relation between union and management that is important. There is a second contract. It is the story of the secret worker – nature. Nature works and the products of nature are beyond price. You can price-tag a Toshiba battery or a Ford truck, but you can't price the oxygen a tropical forest produces. Unions need to rethink the social contract, not with management but with nature. Once we go beyond the political economy of class to the moral economy of nature, we add a depth to the role of trade unions.

Trade unions in India have to be a part of the ecological imagination. They have to realize that labour in any form does violence to nature. The important thing is not to turn sentimental but to minimize such violence, particularly the

violence of monoculture, the violence of the factory farm, the violence of the slaughter house. Labour has also to realize that what was done to the animal will one day be done to them. Scientific management after all began in the slaughter houses before it moved on to the assembly line. Trade unions must challenge the Fordism of today with a new ethic. Once they realize that nature is a gift, renewal becomes as important as efficiency, fertility as crucial as productivity. The challenge to scientific management begins when the capitalist conception of nature is challenged at the level of production and consumption. Workers must not be content with parks as items of leisure. They must protect nature at work.

**A** new reciprocity arises here. Once trade unions accept the axioms of ecology, they challenge capitalism as an ethic for nature or the market as an efficient way of managing nature. Nature, the worker, must be a part of the trade union agenda. In fact, it is ecology that will be a source of creativity and employment. It is nature that will provide meaningful work to millions in India. One of the basic agendas before trade unions is to formulate a white paper – a green one – on the relation between employment and ecology and begin pursuing it. The trade unions must leap beyond the socialist diktats that create an opposition between red and green.

In such a pilgrimage or campaign, it is not capital that trade unions must begin with; it is with their anthropocentrism. The American biologist, Lynn Margolis stated it beautifully. She said man talks so much about his role in evolution that she was tempted to start a trade union for bacteria. Maybe that is where one should begin. A contract with nature that is more than a contract. A sacrament. A plea for reciprocity or for trusteeship. A promise of renewal that assures employment.

There is another aspect that we must emphasize. Trade unions see themselves as bounded organizations with definite membership. Given this emphasis on the factory and the bureaucracy, a whole

domain of work lies outside their dreams of competence. The unionization of the forest, the sea, is still a prospect beyond union officialdom. We classify all these domains through lack as unorganized labour. There is a clericalism, a factory fetishism here. One is reminded of the comment of the Scottish biologist, Patrick Geddes that if Marx had understood the forest better he would have produced a better theory of communism. Unless the trade unions redefine themselves as a commons of work, they will become too narrow. Once they do this, the work of Chipko, Narmada, the Ganga Mukti Andolan becomes part of this new commons of work. Today trade unions only speak for those that the factory has made redundant or the computer has rendered obsolescent. But the destruction of crafts, the continuous uprooting of the dam displaced are part of the new enclosure movements of capital and technology. In fact there is another kind of enclosure movement in India.

**C**onsider the fate of the Ganges in Bihar. A river flowing through the heart of India is divided into private fiefdoms. You have to pay tax to these landlords to cross the river. You have to pay to fish. It is an appropriation of a river, an absentee landlordship of the river which has denied or destroyed livelihoods. No act of criminality has defiled the sacred geography of India more, unless it is the Narmada dam. I think this is even more frightening than the criminal control of real estate in Bombay. The *Andolan* is one of the great unions in India. Unless we see work as a commons, and knowledge as part of the commons, our trade unions will not only be bad philosophers, but poor politicians.

Trade unions need to practice home science. I am not referring to the bowdlerized subject that exists today, providing women with a voyeuristic second-rate science that belittles both science and the domestic domain. I am talking of the work done at home by women and even children, which is not subsistence, but an unstated part of the industrial economy. Ivan Illich calls it shadow work, work

which is not recognized by the market yet goes towards underwriting capital. But there is more. Trade unions must realize that more than 70 per cent of families across the world are headed by women. The husband is either absent, absentee, alcoholic or irresponsible. As father, he is the absentee landlord of the domestic domain. The union must assure that money reaches the child. It has to realize that it is the income in the mother's hands that determines the health and well-being of the child. Trade unions must assure that justice obtained at the level of work reaches the home.

**O**nce these redefinitions are in operation, trade unions can challenge the social construction of reality that corporations are so facile about. They must do so not only at the level of collective bargaining but by altering the definition of the situation. Let me offer two examples. The first is the current debate around *swadeshi* where everyone from the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) to the BJP are having a field day. NRI mouthpieces are waxing didactic about the opening up of the economy, one act which is not considered indecent exposure. Trade unions have been reticent about *swadeshi*. As a result they have allowed the commodification of *swadeshi*, as if *swadeshi* was only about the production of things. Rather, it is a notion of hospitality, of citizenship and the creativity it calls for. Viewed thus, the BJP and Shiv Sena are anti-*swadeshi*. They make the Indian citizen feel alien and homeless in his own country. Here the trade union can become a truly secular entity by using work to challenge the filiations of caste, language and religion. *Swadeshi* is the idea of citizenship where no man feels an alien. Yet trade unions have failed to protect Bengalis in Assam or effectively challenge the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

Secondly, *swadeshi* is about cultural and natural diversity. It is the celebration of indigenous variety, whether it is the 700 different dialects broadcast over Assam or the 50,000 varieties of rice. *Swadeshi* is also an

attempt to resist global monocultures. It is within such a perspective that trade unions must take their stand. This means they have to fight a paper industry that reduces the multiplicity of the forest to pulp, wasting 70 per cent of the tree in that process. This means they have to re-read their positions on the Narmada dam which turns tribals into refugees. What is *swadeshi* if not the protection of tribes and peasants against the monoculture of the large dam? Trade unions must realize that an argument that reduces a damming of the river to electricity and jobs is an obscenity. An industrialism that creates over ten million refugees cannot be *swadeshi*.

But the quarrel has to be carried further because corporations can engage in tremendous acts of gamesmanship. They can project an image of welfare and ecological concern where there is none. Trade unions along with grassroots groups must invent systems of audit, of transparency where the corporation has to make good its word. If Business India can provide a list of the top 500 corporations in terms of profit, trade unions should get together to improvise new notions of audit where corporations are evaluated in terms of a different set of social indicators. To the standard dreams of profit, we add an ecological audit, an aesthetic audit, an ethical audit, a set of indicators in terms of levels of violence, internal democracy, work satisfaction, participation, gender sensitivity and future concern. This has to be done through an autonomous but trade union financed Annual Review of Industry.

**T**rade unions must provide a public assessment of corporations. Such a review, similar to The Hindu's Survey of Indian Industry, must have the standards of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) reports on India's environment. Trade unions should vote their own businessman of the year and give to Indian industry the vision of a different kind of business civilization, of ethical corporations that go beyond the Mallayas and Ambanis or the trite fables of a Gurcharan Das.

However, it is not merely a question of handing out report cards. It is a question of institutionalizing norms for both. We propose that trade unions obtain representation in the Indian Standards Institute (ISI), become active agents in the formulation of standards, particularly those that affect safety, environment, hygiene and health. But standardization can't merely be a paper chase. One needs the systems of knowledge to back up and implement this. We propose that trade unions in collaboration with NGOs and the universities set-up peoples' science laboratories. These autonomous groups could monitor air and water pollution around major industries in each area. NGOs in Madras have already expanded from being consumer forums of citizen's groups by establishing environmental testing laboratories. Bhopal should have taught trade unions the importance of this. But strangely trade unions behaved as if Carbide India was an alien enclave.

**F**inally, trade unions must reconceptualize the structure of the technological project. Innovations in technology must be accompanied by social innovations, institutional visions that add to the imagination of modern democracy. Trade unions should bracket the technological process. They should not vote for every factory merely because it provides employment. Such behaviour is knee-jerk politics. The reactions of most groups to technology is after the fact. Trade unions should recommend that human rights teams be attached to various technological projects from the start. What trade unions also need to do is to turn the transfer of technology into a truly conversational process. Unions at both ends, India and countries of origin—Japan, USA, EEC can engage in an act of technology assessment. This might well prevent the dumping of second grade technological artifacts and tighten institutionalization of safety procedures. Two sets of trade unions, one at each end of the transfer process, can work out better notions of ecology, health, gender justice. One needs an ethic for technology, not a technical ethic, and one feels that trade unions can

provide this. By engaging in such inventions, the trade union can help formulate the idea of an ethical corporation as part of an Indian view of globalization.

But trade unions cannot do this alone. They should combine creatively with NGOs and the universities. In fact trade unions should combine with the universities to create research centres, even institutes of the future, where workers and academics collaborate to create and explore new visions of the future. The model could be the Institute for the Future established by Robert Jungk at Vienna where Jungk asked ordinary people to participate in discussions imagining their own future. The future becomes in this case visions of alternatives accessible to people as a whole, rather than an esoteric dialect for experts. Realistically, why can't trade unions associate with, for instance, the Centre for Community Health at JNU or the Department of History at Delhi University? Labour must create a heuristics for its own future and its own history rather than let company history have the last word. Even if it sounds quixotic, let me suggest this also. If there can be a Lever professor of management, why can't we have a Bhopal professorship or a Neogi chair? Outstanding scholars who have responded to issues of safety, compensation, justice and suffering can confront a new generation of managers with their reflections.

**L**et us be even more specific. What can these new institutes do in this era of globalization and information systems? They need not add to the information explosion, but they need to provide a practical basis for visions. Firstly, it is the workers who can become the great sociologists of the modern city. They can re-open issues like the housing question, the relation between health systems, the question of energy budgets in vigorous ways. The worker in his daily life as technologist, commuter, citizen, parent, consumer acquires a whole variety of perceptions and knowledge about the urban process. These can be articulated into visions of democracy in an everyday

sense, built into new social indicators on the basis of which corporate and state performances can be evaluated. The worker can be the whistle blower of the global regime. It is the unions which must resist the criminalization of politics and the city. It is the trade unions which must support the human rights and peace movements today. In fact, they must formulate a critique of Indian defense policy.

**T**he above suggestions are not meant to intellectualize the problem but indicate how knowledge and research are part of everyday struggles. Resistance and dissent cannot merely be reactive. The oppressed are capable of tremendous invention. They must anticipate and dream a different world. By revitalizing the vision of trade unions, we might approach the Michels problem in a different way. Robert Michels in his study of political parties stated a thesis which was equally applicable to trade unions. He claimed that 'who says organization says oligarchy'. Michels showed how the requirements of expertise, the nature of routine and crisis, the flow of information—all work against the democratic process. By a constant recharging of visions, democracy can constantly reinvent itself. In fact the trade unions should be among the major inventors of democracy. They can also do so by becoming story-tellers, truth-tellers of the global world.

Today the trade unions when on strike, processions, or lockouts are seen by the middle class as disruptors of routine. But when corporations disrupt normalcy they are seen as dynamic. The Indian middle class sees one as behavioural and the other as misbehavioural. The trade unions must redefine this concept of disturbance, but not through threat, coercion and violence, but as dreamers, talkers, paradigm questioners, as the conscience of an increasing monocultural world. C.O. Darlington put it beautifully: 'We need a Ministry of Disturbance, a destroyer of routine, an underminer of complacency....' Trade unions must do precisely this, as the new inventors and pedagogues of the 21st century.



# Domesticating violence

ANJUM KATYAL

AN analysis of Delhi police records for the last year show that 76% of recorded rape cases occurred within the family; 82% rapists were men who knew their targets well (not strangers, as 'common knowledge' would have us believe, but brothers, cousins, uncles, in-laws, fathers, stepfathers); 30% of those raped were little girls between the age of seven and ten. This is just Delhi, just police records, just this past year. For every recorded rape, assume several that go unreported. Here we are not even talking about the myriad forms of sexual abuse that may not qualify as rape, but which terrorize our girl children within the home environment, making them feel helpless, scared and guilty, and emotionally scarring them in lasting ways.

Women's groups working with women who have been victimized find

\* This essay draws on a study of *chhadas* undertaken jointly with Ipsita Chanda, and the paper that resulted from that.

that an overwhelming percentage of incidents of torture, violence and abuse occur within the family and the domestic sphere. Home, we are taught to believe from childhood, is the safest place for a girl to be. Step out, and dangers lurk. Stay inside, and you are protected, looked after, safe. The most persistent and powerful forces of socialization work at conditioning the girl child to view the site of domesticity, the marital home and the family as her rightful and 'natural' place. These forces work subtly through several media: from lullabies and nursery rhymes, school textbooks, advertisements, commercial cinema and the received wisdom of much 'traditional' lore.

It would be salutary to examine just one such medium of socialization: the seemingly innocent, harmless, widespread genre of the lullaby or cradle song or nursery rhyme. Every Indian language has its own version of this: a ditty, song or rhyme, usually made up of four to eight

rhyming lines with a marked rhythm, sung to and by children. In Bengali, such songs are called *chhadas*. My argument is that, precisely because of the quotidian and seemingly innocent nature of such material, its subtle but powerful working as a tool of socialization tends to be overlooked. I will argue that this is the earliest possible form of learning gender roles, of learning to value what is socially acceptable from a woman or a man, so that the social structure can be maintained. This material will be analysed in the context of gender-role formation in order to establish the 'constructed' nature of gendered identity and the resultant delimitation of a socially permitted area of praxis with respect to gender. For the purpose of this essay, I shall restrict myself to taking a close look at the gendered Bengali *chhada*, and leave readers from other regions to draw comparisons with similar material in their own cultures. I will proceed by analysing how this particular form of socialization has a lasting impact, then do a close reading of some common *chhadas* to show up the social and cultural values they enforce, and end by returning to the issue of violence with which I began.

**T**he *chhada* as a form crosses rural, urban, regional and class categorizations. Though rooted in rural and folk Bengal (the images and references are invariably rural, often using *patois* for foods, or talking of local places and customs) they are still sung in urban and contemporary homes, though not as often, widely or comprehensively as they were even till the early years of the century.

Some terms and references have, with socio-economic changes, become obscure, talking of agricultural practices unfamiliar to the urban dweller, but as with many popular nursery rhymes the rhymes themselves get repeated for their lilting rhythm and whimsical charm and, above all, because each generation passes them on as a memory of its own childhood. From my own experience, I am able to say that these rhymes have a curious way of staying embedded in the memory long after their biases are apparent. Apart

from this, our children have met them in their early years, and despite my own ambiguous feelings about the role-typing that seems inherent in them, they have not failed to enjoy the rhymes. The pervasive effect of such rhymes has led me to consider these slight verses as materials of historical record – transmitted down generations, they underline certain continuities that are obvious in the gender ideology mapped out by patriarchy.

**P**ierre Bourdieu analyses the subtle process of indoctrination that starts from infancy, and shows how it leads to the development of 'inherent' or 'natural' qualities. 'The habitus is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are "regular" without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any "rule".... Dispositions are acquired through a gradual process of inculcation in which early childhood experiences are particularly important. Through a myriad of mundane processes of training and learning...the individual acquires a set of dispositions which literally...become second nature.... Structured dispositions are also durable: they are ingrained in the body in such a way that they endure through the life history of the individual, operating in a way that is pre-conscious and hence not readily amenable to conscious reflection and modification.... The habitus also provides individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives. It "orients" their actions and inclinations without strictly determining them. It gives them...a sense of what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not.... (This) can be seen in the differing ways that men and women carry themselves in the world, in their differing postures, their differing ways of walking and speaking, of eating and laughing... The body is the site of incorporated history. The practical schemes through which the body is organized are the product of history and, at the same time, the source of practices and perceptions which reproduce that history. The continuing process of production

and reproduction, of history incorporated and incorporation actualized, is a process that can take place without ever becoming the object of specific institutional practice, explicitly articulated in language.'<sup>1</sup> What Bourdieu is describing holds equally true for attitudes as for behaviour, the one leading directly to the other. The *chhadas* show us how, over and over, certain habits of mind are inculcated in children, till they become so ingrained as to be 'second nature'.

In the second part of this essay I provide a close reading of some common *chhadas* to show up the insidious messages coded in the innocuous-sounding rhymes and catchy rhythms.

*Dol dol duluni*  
*Ranga mathai chiruni*  
*Bod ashbey ekhuni*  
*Niye jabey tokhuni*

In this popular Bengali cradling song, the first line refers to the rhythmic motion of rocking a child. The second, roughly meaning 'a bright red comb in your hair' bears connotations of ornamentation, dressing up, and a glancing reference to the bridal custom of wearing a red and gold ribbon in the hair. Leading directly from this comes the third and fourth line which state: 'Your bridegroom will be here any moment now. He'll take you away at once.'

**H**ere, the mother figure is already, even while cradling and rocking her infant daughter, simultaneously asserting and accepting a future 'given' – that of marriage and her daughter's subsequent removal from the maternal presence/home. The bridegroom (male) will take her daughter away from her: what is also accepted is the lack of choice for both mother and daughter (note that the words deny the female any agency whatsoever), and male power over the female regardless of age (though younger, the male is empowered to deprive the older female of her child).

1. John B. Thompson, introduction to Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by John B. Thompson. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 1991, pp 12-13.

The birth of a daughter is thus inscribed with the anticipation of loss and separation. This is bound to have an effect on mother-daughter bonding. (It is important to note that child marriage is still a reality, or a recent memory, or a lived experience in the cultural context of this rhyme.) Converting this threat of loss and deprivation into a rhyming ditty is one way of containing and domesticating it.

**T**he girl child grows up hearing and repeating the ditty, the words of which, in the simplest possible language, are among the first she learns to understand. Appleby points out how powerful the 'first forms of language' can be: '(They seem) concerned primarily with the self, expressing the attitudes and feelings of the speaker.... Much of this expressiveness derives originally from nonlinguistic features – from the eye contact, facial expressions, posture and gestures that are an important part of the reciprocity of the face-to-face encounter for the adult as well as for the child.'<sup>2</sup> He stresses how these early texts which the children hear 'help them to acquire expectations about what the world is like – its vocabulary and syntax as well as its people and places... the recurrent patterns of value, the stable expectations about the roles and relationships which are part of their culture, will remain. It is these underlying patterns... which make [such texts] an important agent of socialization, one of the many modes through which the young are taught the values and standards of their elders.'<sup>3</sup>

Almost simultaneously with learning the language, then, the girl child is also learning to expect that a groom will come to claim her and remove her from her home and familiar surroundings. There is, from the very beginning of cognition and expression, to be no questioning of this concept of marriage as synonymous with a girl's future. The ditty, by virtue of its gender-definition, also generates a sense

of universality, of a feminine 'fate' which includes all women regardless of age or social position.

Another version of this chhada, quoted by Rabindranath Tagore in his collection *Meyeli Chhada*, has extra lines at the end:

*Kendey kano moro  
Apni bujhiya dekho  
Kaar ghar koro*<sup>4</sup>

The first of these lines literally means 'Why kill yourself crying?' In the penultimate line, the word *apni* means 'yourself', *bujhiya* means 'understand', and *dekho* means 'see'. The sense of the phrase would be something like – 'figure out for yourself' or 'you'll have to realize yourself'. In the last line *kar* means 'whose' and *ghar kora* would roughly translate as 'whose housewife you'll be', 'who you'll live with'. The mother tells her daughter that there's no point in crying, nothing will be gained by it. She'll have to come to terms with her future household and family.

**T**agore comments that this chhada 'clearly expresses the history of suffering that the mothers of Bengal have undergone from time immemorial.'<sup>5</sup> In a sensitive interpretation, he says, 'Rocking an infant daughter on her lap, the premonition of their impending separation keeps surfacing in the mother's mind, bringing tears to her eyes. At that moment, the only source of consolation is the thought that, after all, this is something that has been happening for centuries.'<sup>6</sup> So foresight is also memory, premonition is also recall – a tight circle of inevitability that fixes Woman firmly in her place.

Or, to put it slightly differently, in the words of Kaplan, '...ideology begins to take on a life of its own, to become, in Althusser's words, "images, myths, representations," a distinct sphere no longer necessarily in accord with social prac-

tices, the means of production or the division of labour. "Ideology" becomes what is precisely taken as "natural", what is assumed: it becomes, in fact, unconscious.'<sup>7</sup> It is at this level that the transmission of values and attitudes through chhadas takes place.

**M**arriage is one of the most common motifs in these chhadas. Over and over again, the rhymes talk of children getting married, of a bride for a little boy, of a groom or 'the in-laws' home' (*sasurbari*) for a girl. The difference, a chilling one, is that for a boy a bride is often seen as a playmate, an addition to his life:

*Eyi chandti kaader?  
Kapaal bhalo jaader.  
Eyi chandti ki kore?  
Bou niye khela kore.*

This would translate as: To whom does this treasure (*chand* literally means moon) belong? A very lucky person. And what does this treasure do? He plays with his bride.

In another rhyme, a baby boy is coaxed:

*Kendo na aar jadumoni  
Aanbo tomar bou  
or – stop crying, my little darling, I'll fetch  
you a bride.*

But for the girl, marriage means loss and separation, leaving home and going to a strange household, where her in-laws are not always welcoming or kind.. A popular rhyme goes:

*Putu jaabey sasurbari  
Shange jaabey ke?*

Putu (a common, affectionate nickname for a little girl), is off to her in-laws' place, who will go with her? And then follows a list of luxuries, including palanquin bearers to carry her, fine puffed rice to eat along the way, seven maids to

2. Arthur N. Appleby, *The Child's Concept of Story, Ages Two to Seven*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1978, p 6.

3. Ibid., p 52.

4. Rabindranath Tagore, *Meyeli Chhada*. Sadhana, Autumn 1894.

5. Tagore, *Meyeli Chhada*.

6. Ibid.

7. E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. Routledge, London and New York, 1992, pp. 22-23.

massage her feet with oil, and, adding a betraying note of anxiety at the end, a gift of sweets with which to appease her mother-in-law. In alternate versions of this common rhyme, the list of accompaniments varies, but the line about appeasing the mother-in-law stays the same. The motif of the hard-to-please mother-in-law is endemic, and the mother figure, even as she tries to paint the experience of leaving home in pleasurable colours, cannot resist tucking in a little insurance at the end, to protect her child from a stranger's wrath.

**O**n the whole, the concept of marriage for a little boy is inscribed with notions of gain and pleasure; for a little girl with the threat of loss, sorrow, separation. There are chhadas where the maternal figure sings to the daughter about marriage with pleasurable anticipation, since the aim is not to frighten the child but to condition her to expect and accept her 'fate' – acceptance being a survival tool in a system one is powerless to change – but that still cannot erase, for the female child, the logical implication, in the idea of marriage, of the experience of separation from home.

In preparation for her role as a wife and daughter-in-law, it is imperative that the girl learn certain skills, such as cooking. (The boy has no such onus on him of preparation for adult responsibilities.) Another widely known chhada begins:

*Chhi, chhi, chhi!*  
*Rani randtey shekheni!*

Oh, what a shame! (The exclamation *chhi!* is an expression of disapproval) Rani (literally meaning 'queen', commonly used with affection for little girls) hasn't learned how to cook! It then goes on to list all the amusing mistakes she makes in her attempts to prepare a meal.

Divisions and hierarchies in the domestic sphere – the division of work, the order in which food is served, the apportioning of food or other resources, relations between women and members of the marital family, attitudes to child-

birth and child-rearing, the positions held by daughters-in-law in relation to their husband's sisters, and countless other such crucial aspects that make up the daily life of women within households – are talked of in these rhymes.

This discrimination and differentiation in 'expected' behaviour is part of the social construction of gender hierarchies. 'Gender inequality in class society results from a historically specific tendency to ideologically "naturalize" prevailing socio-economic inequalities...this "naturalization" is an ideological subterfuge.... It is this ideological "naturalization" of social condition, which plays such a fundamental role in the reproduction of class society, that accounts for the specific importance attached to sexual differences.... One result of this is...the image of women primarily destined by their biology to motherhood and domesticity in the service of the male.'<sup>8</sup>

**I**t is impossible to read, or even better, to hear, a body of chhadas without feeling the overwhelming presence of love. A love for the child which is expressed through a thousand terms of endearment, in which the child is compared to the moon, gold, treasure, magic, the best things in life; through innumerable coaxings, soothings and lullabies; through the lilting rhythmic, schemes which capture and convey affection. It is precisely this context of nurture and affection that renders this form of conditioning so insidious, for it comes from the most unthreatening, most trusted source. Like violence in the home, within the family.

In the final section of the paper I will argue that the process by which the chhada has functioned as a perpetuator of a patriarchal social system through historical time is an act of violence; and address the troubled question of how the communicative and bonding aspect of the orature situation can be retained as valuable even while the content or material itself is problematic.

8. Verena Stolcke, 'Is sex to gender as race is to ethnicity?' in Teresa del Valle, ed. *Gendered Anthropology*. Routledge, New York and London, 1993.

Bourdieu talks of 'symbolic power' which refers to how, 'in the routine flow of day-to-day life, power is seldom exercised as overt physical force: instead, it is transmuted into a symbolic form, and thereby endowed with a kind of legitimacy that it would not otherwise have... symbolic power is an "invisible" power which is "misrecognized" as such and thereby "recognized" as legitimate... even those who benefit least from the exercise of power participate, to some extent, in their own subjection. They recognize or tacitly acknowledge the legitimacy of power, or of the hierarchical relations of power in which they are embedded; and hence they fail to see that the hierarchy is, after all, an arbitrary social construction which serves the interests of some groups more than others. To understand the nature of symbolic power, it is therefore crucial to see that it presupposes a kind of active complicity on the part of those subjected to it... symbolic power requires, as a condition of its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it.'<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu also refers to this process as 'symbolic violence'.

**W**e have innumerable examples of how dominant patriarchal value systems are internalized by women, who do not recognize the disempowering effect on them of what is perceived by them as 'natural'. As Philip Corrigan says, '...little words like "good" and "proper" may in the end have been more violent than the big words of exploitation and opposition (to which, of course, they are intimately connected)...'<sup>10</sup>

It is the violence of those 'little words' that I insist on recognizing here – 'little words' which drag a weight of emotional and psychological baggage, which are the means by which a patriarchal socio-economic system, in which women are as much private property as any other form of material wealth, has

9. John B. Thompson, Introduction, Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 23.

10. Philip Corrigan, *Social Forms/Human Capacities: Essays in Authority and Difference*. Routledge, London, 1990, p. 135.

succeeded in imposing its value system on even those it victimizes. Violence done in the name of the 'good' and the 'proper', to both the girl child and the maternal figure. To be a 'good' woman, to be a 'good' girl, is a constant pressure exerted by society. This insidious transmutation of materialist and socio-economic considerations into moral and ethical imperatives exerts a pressure, acts as a violence, which is particularly hard to counter.

My argument is that it is precisely this violence and this pressure which is at work through the 'innocently' affectionate medium of the chhada. The unconscious agent of this violence – the maternal figure – has also been, in her turn, its victim.

**I**t is important at this juncture to recognize, however, that the maternal figure and the chhada form a parallel discourse – that of nurture.<sup>11</sup> The affection with which these rhymes are transmitted to our children face us with a contradiction; if this relationship of nurture and acculturation is to be preserved, would it be at the cost of aspiring to a society free of gendered violence? If we decide to protect our children from such agents of socialization – that type gender roles and circumscribe their identities – then will we at the same time lose the warm closeness of the bond between a child and the maternal figure which could well be crucial to the formation of community? What about the value of orature-transmission, which requires actual physical presence, a shaping of the material according to the situation, and which is therefore founded on a relationship, a bond?

If this is to be valued as the foundation of community, then the orature-situation becomes important, while the material thus transmitted may well be problematic. If we are to consider the role of these rhymes in socialization and identity formation, if we see them as foundations of the historical subject's perception of herself, then we should also be able to see them as an important element in the

history of women's collectivity, providing scope for establishing, through such verse and through the milieu of its transmission, the relationship of nurture, and the sense of community.

**A**ddressing this troubling question of ambiguity and paradox, Kaplan asks, 'How can motherhood ever be non-patriarchal, non-complicit? Honoring the mother's subjectivity, the mother's voice may be important in a culture where that subjectivity and voice have been silenced; but the question is: what precisely is possible for the mother to speak in a patriarchal culture? If the mother's position is patriarchally constructed, can she only speak within the confines of that construction? How could she speak otherwise?'<sup>12</sup>

One answer is that there are other texts, other practices, which express subversion, rebellion, non-complicity, and that by identifying and retrieving them from silence and recognizing their assertive function, one can build a more balanced idea of how our mothers and grandmothers negotiated patriarchy. It should be possible to intervene and to retain the aspect of orature/nurture while reshaping the material to be gender-neutral (this kind of adaptation is the traditional strategy of the orature situation anyway). The chhadas themselves allow us ample scope for this manoeuvring.

Why socialize the girl child to think of the domestic sphere as her 'natural' place, although it has been proved over and over again that for a female, home does not necessarily mean safety? Why posit the domestic as 'safe' at all? Why continue to use it as the positive contrast to the negative alternative of 'the big bad world'? Why participate in the perpetration of a myth which leads the girl child to count on an illusory safety and protection? These questions lead us straight back to the Delhi police records and a truth that is hard to face: that home is no safer place to be, if you are female, than the big bad world outside.

11. This point was foregrounded by Ipsita Chanda

12. E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, p 40.



# Demanding accountability

ARUNA ROY, NIKHIL DEY  
and SHANKER SINGH

THIS was the year of the scam. One followed another to a point where figures lost all meaning. It was also a year which saw an activist court taking punitive action against guilty politicians. Yet we know that the revelations are not consequences of extra-active, or extraordinary investigative agencies. The body politic has been festering for too long with hidden wounds. The rot, as we well know, has set in everywhere.

What is more discouraging, however, is the belief that these revelations or sanctions will effectively curb an arbitrary exercise of power. Will politicians make less money or bureaucrats stop taking their share? Will there be fewer kick-backs? Will less black money be needed to fight an election? Will it be possible to get jobs without paying bribes? Will business houses be forced to realise that some things cannot be bought, whatever the price?

This is the context in which we examine the wider ramifications of a peoples' campaign for transparency and accountability in rural Rajasthan. It is a parallel campaign where a different set of questions have been posed – questions

framed initially by the rural poor, and which offer us more than just a critique of Indian democracy today.

The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) is a peoples' organisation that has used processes of collective analysis and political action as a means of empowerment. For those concerned with people living on the edge of poverty and sustenance, development priorities have become linked to the issue of survival. In the face of increasing unemployment and retrenchment, the diminishing role of the state and its withdrawal from social responsibilities, the poor can now see the development strategy as a systematic effort to paralyse their access to power through a variety of methods. Their exploration led to the identification of the *Jan Sunwai* or Public Hearing as an effective mode where they could speak and be heard. The public hearings on development expenditure at the panchayat level have led to a crystallization of issues and given a tangible quality to the abstract notion of transparency and the right to information.<sup>1</sup>

1. For details of the mode of public hearings, see *Seminar* 431, July 1995, pp. 42-46.

The Sangathan has understood the importance of entitlements in its various struggles. Information is seen as an important entitlement because withholding information weakens the foundation of struggles. The state as the biggest development agency inevitably becomes the target for demanding transparency and information. In areas such as Rajasthan – arid and poor in natural resources – government programmes assume greater importance. In this context people's demand for a right to livelihood, wages and employment were immediately translated into a demand to know how much money was allocated and where and how it was spent. '*Hamara paisa, hamara hisab*'. In other words, accountability became a critical issue in the public hearings organised in five blocks of four districts. Four demands were made: transparency of development spending, accountability, sanctity of social audit and redressal.

**T**he initial queries of the MKSS were fobbed off with overall figures for the district. Although this basic data could be used to critique policy and allocations in general, it did not help the ordinary citizen understand why the village road was not properly built or full wages not paid. When details were sought, the administration, fearing exposure, fell back on traditional arguments for not sharing information. As one goes down the bureaucratic line, information is that much harder to get. After all, it directly affects pay-offs and graft.

At the start of the campaign in June 1994, the MKSS did manage to access fairly detailed information. This was obtained partially through pressure, though some officials did issue supportive instructions to their juniors. However, once the implication of a simple demand for detailed information became clear, the prevarication began. The Gram Sewaks and BDOs used every ruse to withhold information, as it had a direct relationship to their immediate lives.

Public hearings, which took the form of a public audit, dramatically clarified how doctored accounts may fool

official auditors but not the people. They illustrated why transparency of bills, vouchers and muster rolls was required; why social audit was more important than a financial one. Village residents realised that questions must be asked if they were to get their share of the development cake. If 85% of development funds vanish en route, the civil servant or politician is unlikely to ask why.

In the first public hearing in Kot Kirana (Pali district) muster rolls revealed that half the names were fictitious. There were also several false bills. The dramatic nature of the revelations was brought home when a building at the site of the public hearing was shown on record as completed – billed for doors, windows, roofing and even finishing – whereas it stood in front of everyone without even its walls in place!

In Bhim, Rajsamand district where the next public hearing was held on 7 December 1994, it was the same story. It was discovered that Bhairon Nath and Company had defrauded the block of Rs 37 lakhs through false billing. In fact, the company, which existed only on paper, had been checked and cleared by government auditors.

In Vijaypura, Rajsamand district, *benami* sales shown on paper as public auctions had resulted in the disposal of land on the national highway worth over a crore. The amount remitted to the panchayat as the auction price was a fraction of the booty, with only amounts from Rs 500 to 5000 realised for plots worth over a lakh. In Devgarh block, a group of Anganwadi workers related a story of graft amounting to Rs 14 lakhs over four years by their lady supervisors. This from a programme which provides malnourished children with 56 grams of *dalia* and 8 gms of oil per day!

**T**hough the administration chose to keep away from the hearings, it was unable to ignore the fallout. After the first two hearings, FIRs were lodged and officials suspended. The Gram Sewaks decided to go on strike. They went up to the state government asserting that their association was answerable only to senior

officials and would share information with official audit parties, not with any social audit. Ironically, this only helped the movement to expand. From a demand for transparency, the emphasis shifted to a people's right to information. The denial of such information by the Gram Sewaks made the dialectic simple and clear.

The MKSS threatened to initiate a state-wide agitation for the right to information. Interestingly, the Chief Minister, at a public meeting in Jawaja (Ajmer district) – which had earlier witnessed the Gram Sewaks agitation – declared that all information would be shared with the people. Later, on 5 April 1995, he announced in the state assembly that people had a right to information and that photocopies of bills, vouchers and muster rolls would be made available. He added that the state government would set up a special department to look into complaints of financial irregularities.

**T**he panchayat representatives, despite their written assurances to furnish all documents to the electorate, took a cue from the Gram Sewaks and the BDO office and organised themselves as a lobby to protest against transparency. The Sarpanches, including women (33%), succinctly summed up their opposition: if they were to be transparent in the panchayat, how would they recover the money spent on election campaigns? In an effort to suppress the enquiries, women Sarpanches were instigated to physically assault MKSS activists.

For over a year officials and political representatives at all levels were petitioned that the CM's announcement be translated into written orders. When this was not forthcoming, the MKSS issued a notice and sat in *dharna*. The government reacted to the *dharna* notice by issuing a truncated order: applicants were now allowed inspection rights and the right to make pencil notes. The people refused to accept this as sufficient. They demanded photocopies which would reduce fudging, and could be taken home to be read and analysed. An authenticated document would also eliminate the need for a long

drawn out preliminary official enquiry. Given the low levels of literacy in rural Rajasthan, this was a valid demand.

Fearing the outcome of transparency and yet keen to project a progressive image, the bureaucracy ignored the dharna and refused to recognise the people and their right to be heard. All negotiations during the dharna were summed up as... 'The issue is a right one but your methods are all wrong.... The issue is right but it is very complicated to implement....' One senior civil servant went so far as to say, 'It is only an assurance, and many are made. What is so special about this one?'

**T**he poor have always fought their own battles, generally lonely ones. They have had to confront their neighbours, sometimes relatives, take on the powerful in the village community, testify, speak out, expose themselves. They have no one in power protecting their class interests. But this time they secured the support of some unlikely allies. Many in the village helped because this struggle made public the rape of the community and its collective resources. This information helped draw a line of demarcation between those who were part of the extortion network and the rest.

The dharna drew extraordinary support from a cross-section of society. Over 150 villages got together to donate grain. Sympathisers from Beawar contributed Rs 46,000. Free vegetables and water, free photography and video recording services were provided. The dharna brought hope to a people tired of the facile rituals of yet another election to the Lok Sabha. It showed that there were ways open to make the state more responsible and responsive. People clearly understood that the 'abstract' concept of the right to information offered a means to take some matters in their own hands.

The dharna site therefore became a place where lawyers, poets, politicians, journalists, women, trade unions, political parties, ordinary citizens, doctors and, of course, peasants and workers came together to think collectively about what should be done to make the state account-

able. Apart from the 400 letters of support from organisations and individuals, the dharna raised the question of citizens' responsibilities. There was a perceptible change in mood when a helpless electorate demanded control of a small part of its political destiny. Their earlier apathy was a result of a lack of faith in the struggle for change. Hope awakens the desire for active participation in the democratic process. Thus, from transparency grew the demand for accountability. Could a bureaucrat or an elected representative ignore their mandate?

After a month of confronting an administration unwilling to negotiate, a simultaneous dharna began in Jaipur. The range of support continued to grow. The administration was finally forced to set up a committee to work out the practical details of fulfilling the Chief Minister's commitment made on the floor of the house.<sup>2</sup> Stonewalling by the administration had its positive fallout: the message spread during the 40 days of agitation.

**T**he Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, invited individuals from different professional backgrounds to a series of meetings during the course of the *Jan Sunwais*. This culminated in the framing of the first draft legislation on the people's right to information. The local, regional and national press placed this issue on its agenda. Widespread reportage helped spread the message. These meetings led to the formation of a national campaign in July 1996.

The Press Institute and the Press Council had followed the issue since the Beawar dharna. The Press Council took on the job of drafting the final version of the bill, while the Press Institute undertook to publish a monthly bulletin on issues concerning the campaign. The draft bill has now been finalised under the Chairmanship of Justice P.B. Sawant and presented to the Government of India.

2. The committee set up to look into implementing the CM's assurance of transparency submitted its report in August 1996. The ultimate irony is that the government has refused to divulge its contents, marking the document 'secret'.

Members of the Lok Sabha have also received copies of the bill. The United Front government has made a commitment that a right to information bill will be introduced in Parliament within six months.

Democracy, and a real sharing of political power, is far beyond the reach of the common man. Elected representatives have shown a lack of concern for the electorate. Ethics has been divorced from governance, people from their representatives, development from the well-being of those for whom it is intended, education from responsibility. Corruption has therefore become the hallmark of governments and their hypocritical stances. Political parties have ceased to look critically at themselves or the processes they are involved in. Civil servants have sold their souls to the devil with Faustian sophistry. The electorate has been beguiled by a revival of caste loyalties, and offers of a taste of paradise. Global alternatives have been narrowed to a Hobson's choice – free markets symbolised by Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pepsicola, Uncle Chips, Star TV and the horrifying prospect of the rape of natural resources for the gods of profit. The intellectuals have sunk deep into their armchairs in bewilderment.

When the MKSS sat in dharna, the issue had its genesis in a strong local struggle. But the struggle also threw up issues outside its immediate environment.

**T**he reaction of the Gram Sewaks was not unexpected, but their fears helped the people realise that they had caught an important nerve-end. The Gram Sewaks, though at the bottom of the bureaucratic edifice, echo the bureaucratic position. In seminars and workshops, members of the bureaucracy have expressed concern about corruption and the colossal tragedy of development. If only this concern was genuine, there would have been greater support for the campaign on transparency – for the culture of secrecy is so ingrained that it is possible to neutralise constitutional and democratic obligations. In Rajasthan, this campaign offered a shackled bureaucracy a chance to garner public support and cleanse the system. But no

bureaucrat in the state even initiated a debate on how this could be done. In its silence and non-cooperation the bureaucracy exposed itself. Whose side is the bureaucracy on? Such questions need to be asked of a deeply entrenched neo-colonial service which continues to perceive itself as a special entity.

**I**n contrast, the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy went beyond hosting meetings and expressed unstinting support for the issue. A member of its staff, now posted as Commissioner of Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh, passed an extraordinary order giving citizens the right to photocopy all documents relating to the public distribution system – with a provision for fining any official who delayed the process. Even here the most strident opposition came from the bureaucracy. But what the Academy and some of its officers show is that if the civil servant is willing, it is possible to act.

The political establishment displayed different shades of reaction. Politicians not in power have for obvious reasons been more supportive. And many have come out with written and verbal support. For instance, during the agitation, politicians from across the political spectrum participated in large numbers. They were part of the dialogue, looking at transparency and right to information in its many facets. They recognised it as an important issue with far reaching consequences. However, the political establishment was caught between a desire to make popular announcements and a knowledge of just how suicidal such legislation could be. For a class that has repeatedly promised and forgotten, the prospect of an electorate exercising its right to hold them to their word is disconcerting and threatening. So, despite the obvious popularity of the issue, no political party or leader has adopted it as its own.

Local politicians and Sarpanches, most directly affected, have withdrawn from their earlier assurances of transparency. Unlike the civil servants who hide behind government procedures, the local politicians frankly admit that this would affect their income. Since their election

is not funded by political parties, they need to appropriate money for themselves.

The Chief Minister who sits on top of the pile, is caught between the radical assurance made in the assembly and his intent. Held to it, he takes recourse to more assurances or silence and delay tactics. The MLAs and ministers have begun to abuse the Sangathan and express open hostility towards its activists. Naturally there has been a counter demand for information about the Sangathan, its expenses and sources of funds. For the Sangathan, the exercise of preparing comprehensible accounts for the people has increased its credibility and neutralised the whispering campaigns inevitably used to undermine such agitations. It has also clarified that anyone who raises the issue would first have to apply it to themselves.

**W**hy has the issue of transparency and the right to information arisen as a popular demand 50 years after Independence and the framing of a democratic constitution? How has such an 'academic' issue become part of a struggle for livelihood?

Some of its roots lie in a struggling group's collective understanding of changing relationships and power equations in a fluid socio-political scenario. Village people know their reality. But for any kind of change, this is not enough. They must also comprehend the mechanics of power and the idiom of a 'so-called democratic polity'. Since authority is vested in structures that span a large canvas, the comprehension of their own small, specific reality has often been dismissed as trivial or insignificant.

The government in turn thrives on a culture of secrecy and silence, an inheritance from its colonial past. Occasionally, the pressures of democracy force it to reveal information, but often this is so general that little benefit can be derived. In focusing on the muster rolls, bills and vouchers, a nerve-end has been exposed. A beginning has been made in the fight for the state's accountability to its own people. This has now moved onto the

more fundamental questions of transparency of functioning and a democratic sharing of power and responsibility.

Enough has been said about people's knowledge not to have to re-define it. But it would be interesting to re-examine it in the context of the present struggle. Whenever working village women and men in Rajasthan get together, they bring with them a wealth of information about their work and experience of development – detailed accounts of work sites, who worked, how they were cheated, what materials arrived and to whom they went (most often not to the work site). These accounts may be biased, but they are always minute in detail and inter-related with many other happenings. Evening chats in rural Rajasthan are invariably marked by exchanges of this sort.

Working people try and use this method of collecting information, culled and retained mainly through the oral tradition, in their dealing with modern structures like panchayats. Non-payment of minimum wages and cheating at work sites, however, could never be substantiated, because officialdom countered the charges with, 'But the papers do not say so'. Semi-literate and literate workers began to enter information in their little diaries; one was flaunted in public view in Beawer as a parallel in essence and substance to the Jain diaries! Even then, official documents were always contrary to what people knew was right.

**S**o arose the demand for transparency. To ask was the first step. The black humour of a 'mate' running away with a muster roll under his arm was matched by stories of cows consuming muster rolls! Once the importance of access to a muster roll was defined in people's minds, the shades of corruption also became clearer. Muster rolls filled but gone; major discrepancies between *kucha* muster rolls prepared on site and official muster rolls submitted for payment; totally fraudulent muster rolls – a variety of methods resulting in the disappearance of huge amounts of money without a trace.

Once the muster roll was identified and highlighted as an important primary modus for defrauding people of wages, a logical second step was the demand to see bills and vouchers. People observe tractors laden with material; they count empty sacks. They notice that money is paid and transactions concluded. A village existence, in any case, does not allow for great secrecy. Also, it is difficult to hide materials like stones, cement, *chuna* and stone slabs; people know where these go. But the government auditor comes and gives a clean chit and all seems well. With new buildings showing cracks and brand new check-dams sprouting fountains, indifference has given way to indignation. Examining accounts is now recognised as an important skill. Though accounts may not be understood in their overall form of balance sheets and bank statements, people do recognise a fraudulent bill for 65 bags of cement at higher than market rates when only 20 arrived.

**P**eople are well-equipped to demystify accounting technology. We have excellent systems by which illiterate women traditionally lend money, working out dues to the last paise. What people need to know are the methods through which frauds are possible by one group of people and supported through apparently legal methods by others. The unnecessarily complicated rules and orders, used only to facilitate corruption, must be understood to be countered. What lies within the four corners of an official order is not necessarily just.

The right to information issue has been talked about in seminars and policy papers for over a decade. It is also a standard catchword in the lexicon of every national politician and political party. But what shot the MKSS struggle into prominence is that it is perhaps the first grass-roots struggle for the right to information. While important peoples' struggles like the Narmada Bachao Andolan and those of the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy also emphasised the right to access specific kinds of information, this demand was lost in the larger canvas.

By highlighting the citizen's birth-right to obtain information on matters

affecting their lives, the MKSS campaign has given space to a wide spectrum of interest groups to see themselves as a part of this struggle. In this case, the specific demand for photocopies of bills vouchers and muster rolls was indeed seen as an illustration of the importance of the demand, giving it immediate life and meaning. The difference between the issue of transparency and a people's demand for the right to information indicates a fundamental shift in who asks the questions.

Demanding information is more than the framing of a question. It is an attack on the culture of secrecy, the hidden vested interests and the structures that control decision-making. People in Rajasthan and elsewhere see the significance of the issue in their own lives and struggles. Also, the need for victory on the specific demand. The political machinery which had only paid lip service to the issue for years, found itself ill-equipped to deny this simple demand, given its implications for a radical shift in the sharing and wielding of power.

**S**peaking on television, US President, Ronald Reagan explained the size of the American budget by piling up dollar notes, calculating how high the pile would rise on its way to the moon. It did seem at the time that it was the only way he could comprehend what so many zeroes after a given numeral meant. The figures involved in the recent scams have also reached similar proportions. After a point you stop counting and lose track.

A scam a day. Every morning, newspapers bring to our homes yet another story of a nation taken for a ride. *Hawala*, *gawala*, urea, the stock market, uniforms, medicines, land, shoe contracts, bureaucrats selling the country, politicians selling themselves, investigating agencies selling time, and newspapers and magazines selling like hotcakes because of it all. The middle class hates paying the bribes it does—for a berth on the train, for clearing a building plan, for getting a government job, a transfer, a place for their children in college, for getting the

phone repaired, the electricity meter fixed, the license renewed. There is an obsession with corruption. Yet what the middle class hates even more is fighting a lonely battle. There is a need for a Lochinvar—a Seshan, Khairnar, Kiran Bedi, Alphons, and now an entire band of knights in shining armour, the Supreme Court. It has been celebrating the activism of its new heroes in this never ending proxy war.

**W**hile these heroes have played an outstanding part in these battles, is this a solution? There is a degree of truth in the assertion that corruption is a never ending malaise. Anti-corruption campaigns are used from time to time to alter the balance of power between competing equals. Many feel that corruption is an entirely symptomatic and superficial political issue; that endemic causes of such systemic malaise are never examined as a result of such battles. After all, we know that what has been revealed is only the tip of the iceberg. We are all convinced that under any contract, any patronage, in any sector, lies a scam. We have seen how investigating agencies and audit bodies have failed in their duty, such that each scam has grown to gigantic proportions. We are relieved that some big names have finally gone to jail, and that some others are spending a lot of time seeking bail. But none of this is likely to change the way the nation is run. We are happy that some thieves have been caught, but remain certain that the daylight robbery will continue.

How then does the MKSS campaign differ? Is it not also a campaign against corruption? The scams uncovered in monetary terms are miniscule in comparison to the national ones. The people identified as thieves are mere pawns in a system where the powerful continue to call the shots. What is the significance of the MKSS experience?

The most important factor of the campaign in rural Rajasthan is that it is a people's struggle. For the primary movers in the struggle, corruption is only incidental, though undoubtedly an important issue. It is an external manifestation



of the denial of a right, an entitlement, a wage, a medicine, a bag of urea, 20 kgs of ration rice, 56 gms of dalia and 8 gms of oil. Corruption is the denial of a right to question.

**I**nformation has enabled an exposure of the contradiction between promise and action in the polity. It has been a battle led by the poor (or an organisation of the poor) where the 'vested' interest in changing the systems of exploitation is linked to their livelihood and survival. This is immensely significant because the entire edifice stands on this huge foundation of institutionalised robbery. At this 'grassroots' level, such an exposure reveals that for the people at the receiving end of such extraction, corruption and exploitation mean the same thing. The campaign has also shown the middle class that its security is extremely fragile and that its own future is linked to a tottering structure.

It is this marriage of interests between the poor and the middle class that contains the seeds of a people's movement against something much larger than corruption. The specifics may vary from area to area, but the movement has found a tool which exposes the contradictions of an economic order based on profit and money, while claiming to 'sustainably develop' all. It removes the veneer from statistics and presents specifics. It allows those at the bottom to not merely demand their voice be heard, but that their questions be answered. Their questions contain the ingredients of a debate on ethics and governance for which our people are ready. After all, despite a huge increase in personal resources of the middle and upper income groups, there is a growing disquiet about the simplistic packaging of development.

There is unhappiness with the obvious lack of ethics in governance. And there is at least a nagging doubt that things are not quite as they should be. The questions being raised by the poor are based on an indisputable reality which is at gross variance with what has been put on record. The emperor is indeed wearing no clothes!

Even after questioning and a larger assertion by hundreds of people, the government sits inactive. There is a facade of helplessness that covers its lack of intent. The government uses inefficiency as an excuse for deliberate inaction since accountability threatens to pare down all perks. The situation now stands at a point where every inch has to be fought for. There is a need therefore to build public opinion over a large canvas before real power-sharing can begin. The information battle is only the beginning of a long struggle to share power. But the right to information is by itself not enough. The people are frustrated, faced by a government which admits theft and fraud, but will not punish; which knows of its misgovernance and looks the other way. The pending First Information Reports (FIRs), enquiry reports collecting dust—all make the intent clear. The demand for greater accountability is an essential ingredient in the battle for participatory democracy.

**W**here then do solutions lie? Not in seeing any particular tool, movement, struggle or law as the magic wand. That only takes us to the same mindset which has resulted in our democratic institutions becoming perverted versions of what they were meant to be. Democracy in the last 50 years has been manipulated so that democratic participation has been reduced to a vote once every five years. Asserting one's right to participate in decision-making in an everyday sense, rather than once every five years, carries with it the responsibility of using that space. The dispossessed are always prepared to seize any new space. Indian democracy will only reflect the people's voice if it changes its emphasis from the present representative character to a genuine participation of the people themselves. And here lies the burden on all of us. The battle is for more than a right to ask, more than a right to monitor; indeed it is an important first step in an assertion to be heard and to call the bluff of a democratic system. By the people? Of the people? For the people?

# Empowering women

SRILATHA BATLIWALA

SINCE the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution mandating the reservation of one-third of all seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (hereafter PRIs) for women, there has been considerable debate on the implications of this measure for the balance of power in rural politics, particularly for the empowerment of women. The issue has been further sharpened by the larger debate on reservation policy per se, resulting in several different, and sometimes opposing viewpoints.

In general terms, the relevance and effectiveness of the reservation policy itself has come under attack from different quarters. Even progressive elements hold that it has reinforced and strengthened social divisions like caste, and has led to greater social fragmentation and narrowing of identity, impairing the social fabric. Rather than leveling the playing field by ensuring access to higher education – especially in the professions – and employment, reservation has failed to bring about the social transition that was originally envisaged. Political gamesmanship with reservations has led to economically dominant castes and the 'creamy layer' grabbing the lion's share of benefits, while the truly oppressed and marginalised continue to be kept out. Others argue that reservation policies have led to the erosion of merit and quality, widespread corruption, reverse discrimination, and blindness to economic, as opposed to social, backwardness.

In the specific context of reservation for women in political bodies, there are varying shades of opposition. Pessimists believe that within the current patriarchal gender relations that cons-

train and confine women, they will be nothing but puppets in the power plays of men and political vested interests; women will be rubber stamps or proxies, barred from effectively exercising the powers vested in them. Far from promoting gender equality, women's status within family and community will at best remain unchanged, and at worst, new forms of exploitation and oppression of women will emerge, while old forms get aggravated. Reservation for women would create further fissures in an already fragmented society.

Another viewpoint avers that the PRI quotas for women are not based on any innate belief in their equal right to political power, but are grounded in paternalism, reinforcing their image as a 'handicapped' group. It also questions the source of the mysterious proportion of one-third: why not half, which is in fact the proportion of women to total population?

On the other hand, optimists argue that by ensuring women's direct access to formal political power and to resources for development, women's social position will be automatically transformed. By gaining status and decision-making power in the community, their position within the household will also change for the better. The optimists also believe that women will be less corrupt and more responsible in executing their duties than men, since they have not yet been as 'contaminated' by the prevailing feudal political culture.

One cannot easily dismiss the merits of several of these arguments, both for and against. However, I think they fail to address the real potential of the Amend-

ment to empower women and transform traditional gender relations, both within and across the other social divisions of caste, community, class and region. I will attempt to analyse why this is so at two levels: first, at the conceptual level, by unpacking the notion of women's empowerment, the role of the state, and of access to institutions of formal political power in the process of empowering women. Second, at the empirical level by drawing upon data on women's political representation prior to statutory reservation, as well as Karnataka's considerable experience with reservation for women at the Panchayat level, to show how the evidence compares with the arguments set out above.

In recent years, there has been considerable work on the question of empowerment, and on developing a clearer conceptual framework for this rather vague notion. Sen and Grown, Sharma, Kabeer and others have all attempted definitions; my own work in this area attempted to build a theory based on South Asian grassroot practices for the empowerment of women. Whatever their starting points, all these analyses seem to concur that empowerment aims to increase women's access to and control over social, economic and intellectual resources. Furthermore, they agree that the central objective of women's empowerment is the transformation of traditional gender relations both in the private and public sphere. This is manifest, among others, in changes in the gender-based division of labour, women's equal access to private and public resources (including food, health care, education, credit, employment) changes in legislation, public policies and programmes, and women's increased participation in private and public decision-making.

The South Asian framework is perhaps most relevant to the current subject. Here, women's empowerment is defined as 'the process and the result of the process' of (i) Challenging the ideology of male domination and women's subordination; (ii) Enabling women to gain equal access to and control over

resources (material, human, intellectual); and (iii) Transforming the institutions (family, education, religion, media, and so on) and structures (legal, political, economic, social) through which the ideology and practice of subordination is reinforced and reproduced.

The debate on empowerment strategies has not, however, sufficiently explored or analysed the role of the state. The construction and reinforcement of gender roles and the mediation of women's access to resources and decision-making power, are both largely located within the family, household and community. Therefore, whether state intervention is effective or even desirable becomes a critical question. Field experiences from all over the country have made it increasingly clear that women's empowerment processes must take the form of social movements located within communities. They are best initiated through raising the consciousness of oppressed women themselves to initiate and lead struggles for change within their own contexts and according to their own priorities.

On the other hand, it has also become evident that the state can and must create certain enabling conditions which support, reinforce and match grassroots efforts by women for their empowerment. The experience of the women's movement in India bears ample testimony to this. If the state had no role in women's empowerment, why have women's groups all over the country devoted years of effort to campaigns and advocacy for changes in laws, government policies and programmes, and even formal information systems? Obviously, there was both an implicit and explicit recognition that the state had a responsibility to legislate and protect certain formal rights and entitlements for women, so that the groundswell for change does not meet with resistance from law and policy.

Thus, the process of women's empowerment clearly requires two synergistic processes: social change agents and women working at the grassroots level in their constituencies to renegotiate

the gender contract, and the state with its many arms working to facilitate and legitimise women's entry into new spaces. The role of the former is to raise consciousness, mobilise and organise women, and engage in struggles for change at various levels. The role of a state genuinely committed to gender equality, on the other hand, lies in transforming its own institutions and structures, scrutinising its policies and schemes for ideological biases against women, and ensuring them equal access to resources. In other words, the state must create a kind of suction effect, which both accelerates the momentum of and absorbs the thrust for change emerging from the base.

It is in this context that reservation policies for women in formal political institutions – whether panchayati raj or any other – must be viewed: not as a panacea, not even as a pre-requisite, but as an important and necessary enabling condition for their empowerment. Specifically, mandating women's representation in political bodies like the PRIs breaks the traditional boundary which restricted women's access to participation and decision-making in the public sphere and to formal political power. It legitimises and provides state sanction for women's presence in local self-government, and by so doing sends out a larger social message heralding and advocating a significant shift in one area of gender power relations.

Skeptics who believe this is so much window-dressing and political gimmickry may be right in a narrow sense, but they would do well to reflect on the dismal level of women's access to political representation at the national, state, and even panchayat levels prior to the constitutional amendment introducing statutory reservations:

\* In the Lok Sabha, the percentage of women MPs increased from 4.4% in 1952 to just over 7% in 1996.

\* In the Karnataka assembly, the proportion of women MLAs declined from 5% in 1952 to just 3% in 1994.

\* In the supposedly 'progressive' state of West Bengal, the percentage of women

in the pre-73rd amendment panchayats was less than 5%.

More significant perhaps than actual election to the national and state assemblies, women's low access to candidacy in various elections tells a revealing tale:

\* Figures for the proportion of women to all candidates contesting Lok Sabha elections show a steeply declining trend: from 45% in 1952 to just under 11% in 1991.

\* A study of the status of women's participation in Karnataka state found that in the state assembly, the rise in percentage of women candidates contesting elections was insignificant – from 1.3% in 1952 to a mere 4.5% in 1994.

\* However, the same study found that the majority of this increase is accounted for by independents. In the 1994 Karnataka assembly elections, for instance, 58, or 52% of the 112 women candidates contesting were independents. In other words, women are forced to stand as independents because they are unable to secure tickets from the established political parties. But in the entire history of assembly elections in Karnataka state, only one independent woman candidate ever won a seat and that too in 1957!

**I**n contrast, the proportion of women entering the PRIs in Karnataka state in the second round of elections (after its historic and path-breaking implementation of reservation for women in 1987) actually exceeded the prescribed quota. In the 1987 Karnataka panchayat elections, the proportion of women elected was almost exactly 25%; but in the 1993 elections, the proportion increased sharply to nearly 44%, in excess of the stipulated one-third. This means that women stood and were elected from open category or other reserved category seats. How did this happen?

Suman Kolhar, former Vice President of the Bijapur Zilla Parishad, offers an analysis from the trenches. She observed that after the 1987 panchayat election, women PRI representatives throughout the state began to take their roles seriously in an attempt to fulfill their responsibilities, often against great odds. Among other

things, they were more accessible to people because their domestic roles ensured they were not forever away, politicking in distant party or government offices. They were also personally less corrupt and more likely to fulfill their obligations to those who elected them. The village electorate had sufficient proof of returns from electing women, notwithstanding their many handicaps and poor performance in some areas.

**A** considerable number of women who had been in PRIs in the first phase (1987 to 1991), had also gained sufficient confidence and support from their families, communities and political interest groups to stand for election in non-reserved seats, particularly when the rotating quota system deprived them of the opportunity of re-election to their former seats. At another level, realising the growing and relatively greater credibility of women in the eyes of the electorate, political interest groups encouraged and/or supported more women to stand for non-reserved seats in the 1993 elections. Finally, the very visible presence of large numbers of women in the 1987-1991 PRIs created space for a host of new women candidates to confidently stand for election, even in non-reserved seats. Obviously, once women's statutory representation in local self-government became an established fact, conditions were created for their increased entry into these bodies.

The problems and handicaps in functioning faced by women who were catapulted into the PRIs by virtue of the reservation policy are too well-documented to be repeated here. A large number – probably the vast majority – were indeed proxy candidates, and the barriers to their effective functioning arose not only from the patriarchal and feudal structures within which they lived, but also from poverty and illiteracy. However, what is less well known is that despite these drawbacks a large number of women PRI members began to assert themselves and demonstrated a visibly greater accessibility, commitment and accountability to their constituencies.

Take the case of a mandal panchayat member in Bidar district. She was fielded as a proxy candidate by her husband, and was threatened with desertion when, after being elected, she refused to allow him to act in her place. She courageously faced threats of desertion and a bigamous marriage, character assassination campaigns, and gained public sympathy and support from the electorate as she studiously went about attending meetings, visiting local development projects, and fulfilling her election promises.

The point is that such anecdotes are not rare. There are many such stories from all over Karnataka. What is more, there are similar experiences reported from other parts of the country, wherever panchayat elections have been held after the 73rd Amendment. All of which point to the fact that once women gained a legitimate access to this new public space, they were not necessarily and inevitably passive puppets in men's hands. If anything, state sanction for their participation in these political bodies seems to have given many of them the courage and confidence to challenge traditional gender relations. The challenges were not easy, or without great personal costs – women have withstood domestic and caste-based violence and sexual harassment, character assassination, marital and family discord, and the loss of income as the opportunity cost of their participation. The fact that so many were willing to pay the price and carry on is a profound demonstration of how reluctant they are to surrender to a more traditional destiny.

**M**ost of all, there is a growing evidence from all over the country supporting the central thesis of this paper: that wherever women, who were part of grassroots social movements and/or women's mobilization and awareness-building processes, access formal political power through PRIs, they are better able to convert this new political space into a genuine vehicle for empowering other women and themselves. Case studies from Karnataka, Kerala, Orissa,

Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and West Bengal, to cite but a few, all show how women emerging from grassroots women's movements, when elected to PRIs, are far more articulate and effective, function autonomously, and are better able to identify and promote the practical and strategic interests of poor women and the oppressed of their communities. They have also been better equipped to address gender discrimination and harassment within and outside the panchayats, and improve the accountability and functioning of panchayat bodies. The importance of systematic training and continuing support—not only to women but also dalit and tribal representatives—from village-level women's *samoochs/sanghs*, organisations of the poor, NGOs and training institutions, has also been demonstrated.

**O**ne critical feature of the Karnataka PRI experiment has been the practice of intersecting the quota for women with other reserved categories. Thus, one-third of seats within each category, such as SC, ST, OBC and general, were reserved for women. Interestingly, this was not a constitutional requirement, but an intuitive recognition of the fact that women are not a homogenous social category; that gender is constructed and mediated through class, caste, religion, ethnicity, region, location (urban/rural) and other identities, and the nature of gender relations across and between these is determined by the nature of social power relations between them. If reservation was to ensure that women of all social strata would have access to this new political space, a specific mechanism had to be created to enable this. Otherwise, only women of the dominant social groups may have gained membership.

This leads us to a crucial question: can these experiences with reservation for women in PRIs be treated as universally applicable, especially to higher-level political bodies? Will the far more complex and convoluted nature of politics at the state assembly and Lok Sabha levels require major changes in how we approach the question of reservations

for women? It is obvious that reservation in these higher bodies will be empowering only if it is further broken down to ensure that women of all social groups have access. However, since there has been no formal system of quotas for election to state assemblies or the Parliament, it is unclear how women of all strata will be given representation. This is a challenge that those promoting higher level reservation for women, and the political parties themselves, will have to take up. It will also be vital, as has been argued elsewhere, for the progressive women's movement in the country to link up with, support, monitor and demand accountability from women MLAs, MPs and political representatives at other levels.

To conclude, a reservation policy for women in formal political institutions must not be viewed naively, as a magic wand that will automatically bring gender equality in its wake, or cynically, as a piece of meaningless and motivated window-dressing, or pessimistically, as a non-starter in empowering women. It is nothing more and nothing less than an enabling condition, one that any state claiming to support gender justice has inevitably to create. How this is transformed into an instrument for the long-term and broad-based empowerment of women depends greatly on the effectiveness of grassroots movements working for oppressed and marginalised women in enabling women to seize and use these spaces.

**W**omen's empowerment is essentially a political task. It cannot be achieved until and unless a critical mass of women access formal political power by entering political institutions on a large scale. However, they will then have to confront the reality that gender justice and social justice are inextricably linked and require a synchronised approach. The task at hand is undoubtedly onerous and complex, but we cannot dismiss the fact that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment is that one small step for women which, wisely and strategically exploited, could well become a giant leap forward for humankind.





# Life in the death of our cities

CYRUS GUZDER

POP Singer Remo (whose song 'Mumbai City' contains the refrain 'atom bomb at bay'), film director Saeed Mirza (through his anarchic film *Salim Langre Pe Mat Ro*) and crusader against corruption Anna Hazare – all strike a chord in the hearts of the Mumbai-ites struggling to maintain their dignity, as the stifling forces of change in the city close in on them, year upon year. A feeling of being oppressed, overpowered by a suffocating congestion – whether on the streets or on railway station platforms, whether in the ever shrinking size of homes or the stench of ever more visible mounds of rotting garbage – is eating into the vitals of Mumbaiwalas.

And yet they manage, as if by a miracle, to wash themselves early in the morning and reach their place of work every day, mostly on time, mostly looking fresh. Their cheerfulness is sustained by the visible glitter of growing wealth in the city: more goods of better quality in the shops, more telephones and PCOs at every street corner, more taxis on the roads, more electronic signboards announcing superfast trains, and more advertising on commercial TV proclaiming more happiness and comfort in today's society – never mind if it is a mostly unaffordable motor car, Scotch whisky, Intel Inside your PC, or 'more miles' on British Airways. All of this makes one feel good – or so it should – to live in India's most thriving metropolis, where even the world's largest companies are paying the world's highest rents to set up shop. Even the poor, who live in shanties seem to believe that the coming prosperity will rub off on them – as they graduate from selling *limbupani* at one rupee a glass to hawking Pepsi at eight rupees a bottle.

But, every once in a while, Mumbai's citizens are jolted out of their self-deluding reverie. A major power blackout forces thousands of commuters to trudge the many miles home on the railway tracks. A major interruption in domestic water supply turns thousands of docile housewives into militant protesters squatting on major arteries to disrupt the city's traffic. The death of 10-month old Revathi Sukumaran (the child of a ragpicker living on the smouldering garbage dumping grounds at Deonar) from pneumonia caused by the fires lit to recover scrap metal from the debris, led to a major eruption when it was discovered that Suspended Particulate Matter (SPM) in the locality was ten times the permitted level for residential areas.

More catastrophic are those moments when large sections of the city's people seem, simultaneously, to take leave of their senses. We saw instances in the wake of the Babri Masjid disturbances and then, as if illuminated by a flash of lightning, we saw into the darker depths of the city another face, another drama being enacted, with another set of players.

Salim 'the lame', of Saeed Mirza's film, is an actor from this other world. Life here is played out in the bylanes of the poorer areas of the city, often at night, regularly in police stations, bars, *matka*-dens, brothels and *naatch-ghars*. None of the money passing hands is recorded on anyone's income statements; the law is daily rewritten by the politically strong and the morally weak, and every patch of turf in the informal city's life is appropriated and governed by groups of 'netas' who remain faceless in normal times.

Only the growing number of police shoot-outs (sometimes in the compound of a law-court) or the allegations of the brave or foolhardy opponents of the ruling coalition in Maharashtra (led by the Shiv Sena which has demonstrated that it can teach the Congress party a thing or two about turf protection) – reveal the shadowy names of a Chota Rajan, an Amar Naik, an Arun Gawli or a Dawood Ibrahim.

Yet these are the people who, in alliance with our political parties, 'run' the city – not with the naked brute force of the Bihari gangsters, but by recruiting the growing lumpen elements to exploit key income generating activities (land encroachment, gambling, smuggling, liquor) and then entering into subtle arrangements with political leaders to manipulate the law to suit these arrangements. Often, they ensure that certain laws, such as the urban land ceiling law, are not changed so that a vast number of people, compelled through circumstance to earn a living in Mumbai, are caught in this intricate web of exploitation. From what these poor millions contrive to ensure their survival with some dignity (be it for a ration card, a gas connection, a copy of a birth certificate or a water connection), a little of their money is 'creamed off the top' by our shadowy friends to fatten and lubricate a system of governance that has long since ceased to concern itself with the welfare of the average citizen or the well-being of the city.

**W**hat does it mean for a city to be held in sway by such power groups whose real face is hidden from the people by the camouflage of empty political slogans? (Bal Thackeray's offer to Anna Hazare to join a government-led committee to abolish corruption is as good an example of an invitation to sup with the devil as we can see in our times. It is as well that Anna Sahib is aware that he will need a long spoon to escape being singed). What does it mean for the physical and psychological health of the city that as its population grew by 230% in the last three decades, the open space (in sq metres per person) available to residents shrank by 85%? Or,

that by now about half of its residents live in substandard housing, most of these hutments, without access to a tap or toilet in their room and the majority of rooms – each housing at least an entire family – no more than ten feet by twelve feet in area?

What do any of these statistics mean? What does it mean for the United States that over half the black children are today born to single parent families? Does the obvious lack of stable family life suggest that such black children will more easily be drawn in to a life of violence and crime? What does it mean for the health of Indians today that tuberculosis kills more than five million people each year, that 34 million people are now carriers of the fatal form of the hepatitis B virus, that we account for 85% of all malaria cases in South Asia and that *kala azar*, which killed 2000 people in Bihar four years ago, is poised to attack 75 million people, identified as high risk; in that state and neighbouring West Bengal?

**M**any of these diseases were on the verge of eradication some years ago. Indeed, the city of Surat has shown, under its intrepid Municipal Commissioner Rao, that such scourges can be dealt with decisively. The plague affected parts of Surat are now cleaner than most Indian cities. Yet most would agree that the greatest scourge today is not the AIDS virus or the parasite of malaria falciparum, but the collapse of city government at the hands of our elected representatives who lack education, skills and a commitment to improving living conditions. It is difficult to avoid pessimism in the face of the statistic that 'the average annual per capita amount spent by the Delhi Administration on improving the lives of slum dwellers between 1990 and 1995 is rupees nine'.

How can the citizen regain control of the process of city management to bring about a more orderly progression towards civic improvement? Do NGOs provide the vehicle for more committed, more principled city initiatives? 240 NGOs surfaced in Mumbai after the 1993 riots, working in neighbourhoods to restore the city's fabric and heal wounds. Alas, this mosaic

of personal initiative is built around a reaction to specific neighbourhood, activity or community issues and has rarely been focused on 'the big picture'. Often, an NGO comes into being to respond to the tragic or inhuman consequences of thoughtless city planning programmes – for example to alleviate conditions in slums which grow up around job generating areas, whereas the planners should have been promoting schemes to create jobs *together with* residential accommodation *in new centres of growth*.

**I**n this respect, the growth of metropolitan Mumbai these last 50 years is a story of lost opportunities, the more poignant for the fact that as early as the late sixties, Charles Correa, Shirish Patel and others had mooted the creation of a new city across the harbour with every opportunity to 'master plan' a balanced city – balanced between jobs and housing, between upper and lower income-group homes, between public and private transport – from its inception. Now that over ten million people are chained to the treadmill of coping with survival in Greater Mumbai, the problems that are surfacing seem almost to defy solution. Let us take a quick look at some of these.

Two square kilometres at the southern tip of Mumbai's islands provided the British with their first toehold, a sheltered port for their merchant ships and a small, fortified outpost from which to dig in against other European competitors and marauding Marathas. The transition from the East India Company to the Crown becoming the major political player on the subcontinent; from the hamlets surrounding the British fort to an exploding city of two million; from the modest government dockyard growing to become the largest port on the west coast thanks to railway links with the Deccan hinterland – all were accomplished before Independence in the belief that the city could be viably managed from the safe haven of its southernmost extremity.

That two million swelled in two decades to five; that the island city (Colaba to Mahim) was then extended to cover Greater Mumbai (Mahim to

Bhayandar and Thane); that two decades later more than six million lived north of the island; and that the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) embracing Bhiwandi, Kalyan, Panvel, Pen and Alibag will soon be home to a population of over 16 million – seems to have taken planners and politicians by surprise. The last two city plans for Mumbai covering the '70s and '80s talk about 'de-congesting' the island and promoting new centres of growth across the harbour. In actual fact, however, huge incentives were given to create a new business district at Nariman Point and then at Bandra-Kurla. Meanwhile, New Mumbai waited till well into the '90s to be integrated with Mumbai's telephone exchange. And the suburban railway line from the city connected New Mumbai only in 1996! Meanwhile, the government's policy on where to locate industry has see-sawed to and fro across the harbour.

**D**uring this time, Datta Samant helped the textile industry collapse in central Mumbai, the Thane-Belapur belt at New Mumbai became one of India's most polluted industrial areas (by now housing a million people overflowing from Greater Mumbai), and the growing informal and service sectors attracted immigrant workers who had no option but to build their own shanty accommodation. Till 1995, the government refused to acknowledge their existence and forbade the municipality to provide conservancy services to these areas, estimated to house well over four million persons, on the grounds that they were illegal.

For a government to bury its head in the sand on such a monumental scale can only leave an observer gasping in disbelief. Yet more than 10 million people have allowed this scandal to be perpetrated on themselves. Why? A clue is provided by the draft MMR plan, released in mid-1996 for public comment, prior to being published as the final plan. Once gazetted, it would then set its stamp on the land use pattern of the metropolitan area for the next two decades.

Among the major modifications proposed are: a project to site a new

international airport at Mandwa-Rewas, a beautiful area across the harbour, hitherto zoned for tourism, recreation, horticulture and fishing and expected to lead to the displacement of 14,000 fisherfolk; a proposal to rezone from 'Green' to 'Urban' a huge tract several kilometers on either side of the main road from Mandwa to Alibag, in the heart of the last remaining green zone across the harbour (where else will 15 million Mumbai-ites be able to go for leisure?); and a proposal to effectively double the permissible density for office and residential construction in Greater Mumbai. In other words, all the sins of omission and commission of the last 50 years will be revisited upon this hapless metropolis with a vengeance.

This time there was an awakening among NGOs. Seminars were held to explain in layman's terms the jargon of the plan documents and maps; a brave and upright Metropolitan Commissioner convened discussion groups to de-mystify the assumptions behind the document. By the closing date in November '96, the MMRDA was flooded with thousands of pages of 'comments and objections' and, lest the planners were tempted to treat these casually, a vocal demonstration was held by NGOs outside the MMRDA headquarters to extract a promise from the Chief Planner that the Authority would conduct public hearings *on site* where development proposals involved major changes to these areas.

**I**f this movement – for citizens through NGOs to debate with government in the jargon of the city plans – gains strength to force the government to rethink its planning strategies, to reintroduce the notion that people's lives are deeply and permanently affected by planning decisions to site industries or airports or build new transport links – it will be the first step towards moving away from the last 50 years of 'disjointed incrementalism', a phrase used liberally by delegates at the recent UN Human Settlements Conference at Istanbul to criticise the nature of the typical growth of the post-war city.

Two recent developments offer a hopeful pointer to the future in the midst

of all this gloom. One relates to the master plan of a large city-centre area – the Parel mill lands in Central Mumbai; the other to two divergent philosophies on how to re-develop Mumbai's slums. The proposed transformation of the Parel lands by bankrupt textile mills implementing an earlier policy (allowing them to privately develop one third of their land, on condition they surrendered one third for public use and the remaining one third for low income housing) neither responds to the local needs of people in the area nor to the city's needs in terms of deficiencies in open spaces and public amenities. The result will be nothing more than another dollop of 'disjointed incrementalism', while pockets of land earmarked as open or public spaces will, as hitherto, become garbage dumps or shanty encroachments.

**A**n innovative set of studies involving architects and students (including Charles Correa, Karan Grover and Sen Kapadia) has caught the attention of the government. These recommend that all the mill lands be clubbed together and treated as a separate zone with a specific set of development control rules. A master plan would then permit individual mills to develop one third of their lands, but would zone the other two thirds into larger parks and more logical public amenities, respecting local settlement patterns and the prevailing transport corridors, and encourage re-cycling of mill buildings to preserve a more harmonious human scale and urban fabric. The government is now under public test to see if it places the city's interest above that of a few dozen mill-owners.

The Slum Redevelopment Project of the present Shiv Sena government has also not been without major controversy. There are philosophical issues around whether over one million households, which all state governments have hitherto described as illegal encroachments, should now be presented with a free apartment of 250 sq ft (about twice the present average size) built for them by private builders who will receive, in return, the right to develop on the same site an equivalent area for commercial sale in

the open market. And what about the effect on civic services, of doubling residential densities in the city's most congested areas? What of the oft-discussed nexus between the construction lobby and the ruling party? Both Bal Thackeray's family and Chief Minister Manohar Joshi's son are heavily into construction.

**Y**et, here is a government that, for the first time, acknowledges the existence of slum dwellers as a necessity in the city – that they serve the organised sector, they provide much needed services, they are enterprising and energetic, that they deserve decent housing. In fact, it is this very understanding that offers the possibility of an alternative model of slum redevelopment. Shirish Patel and a number of NGOs (including SPARC and the National Federation of Slum Dwellers) advocate that what slum dwellers need is the honest transfer by government of a clear title to their individual plots of land and access to institutional finance. With this they can build their own homes, more congenial than the multi-storeyed apartments to be dished out by private builders, and which they can upgrade over time as their incomes rise. This will spare the city the trauma of doubling densities and, possibly, some vigorous arm twisting that builders may resort to in the 'free housing' programme. Currently, both schemes are under consideration and, hopefully, other models will also emerge.

For the first time in decades, it has become possible to imagine that the millions condemned to live in Mumbai's slums can move into larger quarters with legal title to their land, a water tap and their own private toilet – no longer at the mercy of a slum lord extracting a price from politicians at election time, in return for the right to extort payments for every square foot of development in the slum. But precisely because the government has this to lose, is it likely that its leaders will put the interests of their citizens above their own? For fifty years, the rural poor have benefited little from the human concern that our democratic polity should have encouraged. Migration to the cities continues for want of fundamental land

reform and through government policies designed to keep farmers poor – a situation admitted by the government only in 1993, under the searing scrutiny of the GATT negotiations. All this time the same government showed the same inhumanity to the poor in their cities – failing to deliver land for housing, failing to provide basic services and failing to promote conditions where people could find jobs with a decent home near their places of work.

Mumbai's millions generate a disproportionate amount of Maharashtra's wealth. The good cheer they display in the face of their squalor has lulled the city's leaders into believing they can take this fortitude for granted. But the corrosive toxins in the air, the heavy load of parasites in our drinking water, the stress of going to work riding helplessly on the swell of a sea of commuters, daily insulted by delayed trains and blaring loudspeakers and the pre-dawn queues at community water taps and toilets in *bastees* – these can be seen by those with eyes to see as writings on the wall, and must be understood for what they are leading to.

**T**he spirit of Marie Antoinette is alive in the breasts of Chief Minister Joshi and the Hinduja as they contemplate their vision of gleaming jets taking off from the new trans-harbour airport (a mere Rs 5000 crores later). The same self-delusion stirs the officials of ILFS who, for the tenth year in a row, contemplate another dazzling vision – a bridge for motorists across the Mahim Bay (about Rs 350 crores later) – so as to shave 20 minutes off the car journey from the airport to downtown. No matter that only six per cent of the city's journeys are performed by private car or that if only a small number of the 83,000 hutment dwellers at Sahar airport were re-located, there would be no need for a new international airport.

We do not know if Marie Antoinette was listening to the clatter of the tumblers' wheels taking their hapless prisoners to the guillotine. Nor do we know if those who 'run' the city of Mumbai – atom bomb at bay – can hear the future ticking away....

# Local geography

KAI FRIESE

AT the entrance to my neighbourhood there is a large municipal map with the reassuring legend 'you are here'. Well, I presume it says something to that effect, but I can't say for sure because the alphabets of local geography, all the blocks from A to Q have been entirely obscured by other inscriptions, peeling layers of posters for 'Her Body' and other morning glories at nearby Eros cinema, and some offers of 'Weight Loose' at Slimline Health Club. If I were better read, I might delight in the *bricolage* of this defacement. In fact, I feel territorial about Jangpura Extension and wish I could read the map. But lately, much of what I have been reading instead tells me my fondness for my neighbourhood is a strange perversion: 'topophilia',<sup>1</sup> or worse, a symptom of 'the phallogentric geographical gaze'.<sup>2</sup>

1. The term was coined by a self-confessed topophile Y.F. Tuan who describes my symptoms perfectly. 'fleeting visual pleasure; the sensual delight of physical contact, the fondness for place because it is familiar, because it is home and incarnates the past, because it provokes pride of ownership or creation; joy in things because of animal health and vitality.' Cited (disapprovingly) in *Feminism and Geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* by Gillian Rose. Polity Press, 1993, p 49.

2. Gillian Rose, p 101.

In the peculiar world of post-modern theory, any attachment to place carries such stigma. It is hopelessly modern, which is to say out of date. Needless to say, these texts give short shrift to the nation, which as every literate person knows, is a fiction, and of course an 'imagined community'.<sup>3</sup> There are at least two books that have planted this realisation firmly on our shores: *Imagining India* and *India Imagined*.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, an insight that doesn't require much imagination.

Actually, it seems fairly obvious to me that the nation is an abstraction that we usually experience rhetorically, and increasingly as a spectacle on our electronic hearths. India, I know only too well, is a magazine, several TV shows, and countless songs. One particular song that rams home the point with unintentional vigour, is the recent Channel V fuelled hit

3. The thing to do, Iain Chambers suggests, is 'to pass from faith in an imagined "community" to the recognition of complex identities forged in discontinuous, heterogenous histories...to pass into a contingent world.' *Migrancy. Culture. Identity*. Routledge, 1994, p 102.

4. If the titles are anything to go by. I haven't read them.



'I am an Indian' by the duo *Noble Savages*. 'I am an Indian, from Bombay city, I am an Indian so you better follow me' they growl to a ragga beat. Which is inane enough, but the video channel also broadcasts a short interview with the singers, who we learn are in fact from a small town in Germany. Their strongest memories of India are genetic. 'I think it's important for everyone to identify viz his country,' says the boy singer in his teutonicly inflected faux-Jamaican brogue, and without a shred of irony.

**S**o, yes, when it comes to the nation, I'm an imaginary Indian and not a noble savage. Yet somehow, the neighbourhood is a different matter. In my colony, I'm a native...and a phallogocentric tophophile to boot. Jangpura Extension is for me the most concrete of territories. I traverse it daily on foot, leaving from the east and returning from the west (for complex but not cosmological reasons). I know its boundaries, which like any 'real' frontier are zones of nuisance, transition and danger. To the east there is Mathura Road where I must negotiate with the autowalas; to the south there is the railway *phatak* and its cranked barriers (just like a border crossing) that separate us from Lajpat Nagar; to the west, the murderous traffic of Josip Broz Tito Marg (or alternately an underpass where on dark nights you must run the gauntlet of hulking, sometimes elegant *hijras* who sell sex in the shadow of the Defence Colony flyover). To the north there is a sprawling *nala*, a former stream on whose further shore is a *kabristan*, a burning ghat and that whole stretch of what was once necropolitan Delhi, littered with the tombs of empires from the Sayyads to the Mughals. But never mind the thanatos, because returning to the heart of Jangpura we find Eros and its undoubtedly phallogocentric delights. Turn right, turn left and left again, and I'm home.

That's my most basic map of Jangpura. It's crude, but it gives me a satisfying sense of orientation and centredness. It also means, of course, that I can't be truly PoMo. Why? Well, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would tell you 'it is

this longing for a center, an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions'.<sup>5</sup> It's true. She's right. It does. Because my delight in my concrete locality inducts me into an understanding of the hierarchy of places I inhabit, from the body (which is too intimate to routinely regard as a place) to the world (which is too expansive). It is in my neighbourhood that I can ground the cartographic metaphors that bridge the space between these places.

This is, I think, nothing unusual. Even Ed Said said as much in the preambulatory chapters of *Orientalism*, where he acknowledges the universal impulse of what he calls 'imaginative geography'. Referring to Gaston Bachelard's 'poetics of space' he writes: 'Space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here.'<sup>6</sup> Yet the overwhelming intent of much modern, er, I mean contemporary, thought (including Said's) about geographical identity, is a polemic against local sentiment. The ideal post-modern neighbour is a strange creature who cannot share the pleasure of location because his mind is elsewhere. The 'exile', the 'nomad' and the 'schizo' are the model citizens who crop up repeatedly in this literature. They are 'de-territorialised' and 'de-centered' individuals, and as far as I can tell they have no bearing on reality.<sup>7</sup>

**B**ut ho hum! Let's return to the natives of Jangpura Extension. Many of them are exiles, others are nomads of sorts, and at least a few are, I suspect, schizo's. Yet most of them seem quite at

home, and well centered in their own cartographies.

**E**xilic Jangpura was first revealed to me by Mr. Mohinder in E-27. Uncle Mohinder died last month and crossed the water to the *shamshan ghat*. But he remains the quintessential figure of a neighbour. He was already in his eighties when I got to know him, his orbit confined to the locality, but our paths usually crossed at least twice a day and he could enforce the ritual of a neighbourly chat with a reproachful glance as I passed the gate of *Mohindra Niwas*. I'm glad he did. Mr Mohinder remembered the days when the entire colony was a horizontal neighbourhood of single-storied homes like his own. He told me that blocks D and E had originally been allotted exclusively to refugees from Model Town, in Lahore, and he would reminisce about the spacious beauty of this lost neighbourhood. But one day we had a house guest from Pakistan, from Model Town in fact, and he told me that the place was littered with modern monstrosities like our own *dholpur*-clad apartment block. Nothing remarkable, I suppose, but I liked the image of a map of a corner of Lahore being superimposed on Delhi's landscape and then erasing itself in similar ways in both places. I imagine that Jangpura's original template is similarly peopled with exiles turned stolid house owners, circuiting the municipal parks with their pomeranian satellites at dusk.

Jangpura is of course a bourgeois neighbourhood. But that obvious term conceals as many geographies as it reveals. There are the territories of the *jamadarans* for example, purchased by auction from a contractor mafia when the neighbourhood was being built half a century ago. Many of these enterprising crones still stalk the streets and hector their subcontractees, the Bangladeshi rag-pickers, along the shadowy network of service lanes. Then there are the residual Gujjars of Bhogal – the village that Jangpura swallowed – who manage to nourish their cattle in the *nalas* of the colony. Here, along these grassy and acacia lined embankments one can glimpse strangely

5. Cited (reverently) by Iain Chambers. p 71.

6. *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 54-55. I haven't read Bachelard either, but I will. In Said's account at least, Bachelard's poetics of space are grounded not in the neighbourhood but the home, which 'acquires a sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imagined, because of the experiences that seem appropriate for it'. Sounds like tophophilia to me.

7. The exile is a particular favourite of Said's; the Schizo and the Nomad are the heroes of parts 1 and 2 respectively of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. You can meet them all in Chambers' *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* as well.

linear vistas of a vanished pastoral landscape which bring to life that chestnut of every old New Delhiite's conversation: 'I can remember when all this was *kikar* forest.'

One of the grandest houses in Jangpura belongs to the Lingsangs, who are rumoured to be of the royal family of Kham in Northern Tibet. And Khampas are famously fierce itinerant pastoralists and brigands. But like nomads everywhere the Khampas do not roam around aimlessly. They have a strong sense of local geography, as does the growing tribe of Tibetans (some of whom must be Khampas), who have been expanding their holdings in the neighbourhood around the original focus of the Lingsang's mansion, acquiring four new properties on our street in the past two years.

**M**ore straightforwardly nomadic are the shifting populations of Kashmiris and Afghans who have a long tradition of wintering in Jangpura, driving up rents as they come, depressing the market and the landlords as they go. Lately the troubles in their summer pastures have made them a more constant feature, and a permanent anxious presence in the local STD booths. Some of the more strapping Afghans are crippled amputees, a disturbing embodiment of their fractured homeland. But they seem at peace in the neighbourhood.

Clearly, Jangpura has many maps. Perhaps as many as it has inhabitants. This may seem perilously close to the dreaded post-modern vision of a geography whose center doesn't hold. In fact, the feminist geographer Gillian Rose has a nice term for this perspective which fits Jangpura too: 'plurilocality'. But I don't think this is a uniquely contemporary condition. Places are always weighted with multiple associations of the people who frequent them. In India certainly, this principle is often systematically applied in the superimpositions of sacred geography on the landscape, a system that also involves geographical transpositions, so that for example Kashi can be found in several locations, and many places are symboli-

cally represented within the sacred circuit of Kashi.<sup>8</sup>

But this sort of complex geographical cosmology also requires an overarching grand plan within which plurilocality can be situated. I haven't actually seen one for Jangpura yet. Perhaps it's concealed beneath the posters on that municipal board. Probably not, but I do know what I'd like to find there: an Egocentric map.<sup>9</sup> This expressive name describes a distinctly pre-modern, and fortunately, oriental, cartographic technique, also known as Azimuthal Equidistant Projection. It was developed by the Arab mathematician al-Biruni about a thousand years ago. In an egocentric map one's own location is represented as a point surrounded by the rest of the world. Distances from any point on the globe to the center are accurately represented to scale, but the map also has its own peculiar distortions. The antipode of your location, i.e. the point half-way round the earth from you, becomes the outer perimeter of the map. On my egocentric map Jangpura would be surrounded by a circle representing a point off the coast of Chile. Such a map has many virtues. It is useful; its distortions are obvious; it acknowledges other peoples' maps, since every location demands its own egocentric projection. And of course it gives Jangpura a pleasant maritime horizon.

**T**he Egocentric map is for me an almost archetypal idea. But it has a necessary antipode of its own which also has a somewhat archetypal appeal. I found such a map described in a book by the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr: 'A patient of mine used to represent himself by drawing a circle. He had the fantasy of the circle expanding until it included the whole world, so that he and the whole world would finally be indistinguishable. He was a schizophrenic who was quite

8. This example is fully described in Diana Eck's *Banaras, City of Light*. Princeton University Press, 1982.

9. A lovely name given to a lovely map in a lovely book: *Poetry of the Universe, a mathematical exploration of the cosmos* by Robert Osserman. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995.

incompetent to deal with the world in fact....'<sup>10</sup>

**B**etween these two imaginative geographies, I know I prefer the Egocentric map. The featureless Schizophrenic map, devoid of fixed points of reference is, I fear, closer to the post-modern ideal. And it may well be a true map. A recent book by a French ethnologist, Marc Augé, paints a disturbing but convincing picture of an expanding featureless world of 'non-places'.<sup>11</sup> Augé suggests that at least in what he calls the 'advanced west' people spend a growing portion of their lives in the anonymity of transit or in anonymous replicable sites ranging from cash-point counters to Disney worlds. It is a world in which people are not spatially bound, and characterised by what he describes as a three-fold excess: an excess of space (linked to increasing mobility), of time (in the flood of 'events' that assail the individual) and an excess of references, by which (crudely) he means that people must pay attention to signs rather than their environment. Supermodernity he calls it.

I'd like to say 'bonne chance Marc! Your world not mine'. Here in Jangpura we are spatially bound, nothing much happens, and no one pays attention to signs.<sup>12</sup> But while Augé's vision is apparently descriptive, it is also more insidiously prescriptive. Supermodernity is increasingly a global phenomenon, he argues: this is the fate of the world.<sup>13</sup> Like the Schizophrenic's fantasy, the postmodern or supermodern imagination sees itself expanding to include the whole world.

Meanwhile, my imagination continues to delight in the experience of my local, particular geography. In Jangpura.

10. Anthony Storr, *The Integrity of the Personality*. Ballantine Books, 1992, p 72.

11. *Non-Places, introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. Verso, 1995.

12. Sometimes at great personal risk: I once saw a man urinating off the top of a pedestrian overbridge which crosses the tracks from Jangpura to Lajpat Nagar. He was staring at a plaque with a red skull and crossbones, which promised him something like 10 million volts, as his stream passed neatly between the high tension wires of the Delhi circular railroad.

13. 'For we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at. We have to relearn to think about space.' Augé, op cit., pp. 35-36.

# Kaliyug

GAUTAM BHATIA

BRAHMA stared out of the picture window at the universe. Contemplating the design of a perfect being, he doodled for hours on his drafting board. Throughout the early stages of creation, man remained a philosophical abstraction. It was nice to think of a being so sublime and self-sufficient that it made the act of creation worthwhile. But could there be such a creature? Could there be something so perfect as to cast doubt on God's position itself? Could there be someone better than God?

The first sketches were loosely drawn and showed an awkward, excessively hairy creature that looked somewhat deceitful and apprehensive, much like a Bombay actor in the standard villain scenes. Or a politician emerging from a legal inquisition. When he produced a version that looked even more conceited and arrogant, he knew he was getting closer to the real human being. The eventual design that he shared with Mrs Brahma had a thick neck and a jutting chin, with beady, suspicious looking eyes concealed behind heavy, half-closed lids—something of a cross between a retired bureaucrat and a newly elected minister.

Raising her eyes from her needlework, she gave it but a cursory glance. 'You know,' she said 'duplicating figures

from public life is not such a great idea.' She looked her husband squarely in the face. 'Why don't you make man in the image of God?'

Without final approval from his wife, he inserted the perfect being in an egg, and set it afloat on one of the earth's numerous liquid surfaces, somewhere just south of Calangute beach in Goa. Late in the evening, by which time even the noisier American tourists had departed, a crack appeared in the egg surface, and with a flash of thunder, some lightning, a bit of rain from a creative team of special-effects artists, the shell burst open. And the perfect being was thrust full-grown into the world.

Born an adult, he swam across to the shoreline with a contented butterfly stroke, hoping someone from the Olympic Selection Committee was watching. As his feet touched the ground, the sacred earth that was to be his home for the next million years or so, a prayer came to his lips. But he wasn't sure whether to pray to Allah, or Ram, or Jesus, or who. He knew he had landed on Christian soil, but in a place that was also known for Hindu-Muslim rivalry. Should he just begin with a light Hindu hymn, and then ease into a heavier Episcopalian chant; maybe end with a sort of Buddhist vote of thanks? Or should he just hum a gentle

Sufi strain.... Suddenly aware of his own naked condition, he felt happy that his landing had been timed for this late hour. Also in a place appropriately designated a 'nude beach'. Awkward with his nakedness, he hurried along, hands cupped over his completely nude face. Plucking the largest leaf from a nearby fig tree, he placed it squarely in front of his head.

**A**gainst the emptiness of an abandoned beach, with its litter of Coke cans and Maggi noodle packets, its stack of plastic lounge chairs, he pondered the eternal questions. What is the meaning of existence? What is life? Which came first, life or existence? Is there a purpose to religion, or did God invent it merely to keep people busy on Sundays? And what of politics? Is that too just a legitimate method of giving employment to the handicapped? Is there life after death, or just more death? Is there a hereafter? If so, is it better than a here-in-under or a herewith? Why are some shops closed on Monday, others on Tuesday? Is there a God?

He assessed life on earth, and his place in it. He had no form of identification; he didn't even have a name. How was he to introduce himself? Without a ration card, he knew he would have no access to subsidies; without a passport there was no chance of escaping to USA. Even England. He felt utterly and hopelessly lost. Sitting back on one of the abandoned beach chairs he pondered over the whole spectrum of sensations available to him as a human being. The range was enormous; it appeared like a rainbow of distinct colours in the evening sky. Beginning with despair and dereliction, the list traversed the broader areas of fear, alarm and terror; then went into the milder anxieties like mistrust, doubt, misgiving, displeasure, confusion, vagueness, distaste, and shame. Finally the sky lit up again with feelings of joy, happiness, gratification and pleasure.

Strangely, he felt none of the influences of the sensory rainbow. He was a man without attachment. Without a home, he had no mortgage or loan payments; hence no feelings of mistrust and anxiety.

He had no government job, nor the skills of business management; thus none of the risks of losing employment benefits. He was relieved of despair, dereliction, fear and alarm. He was without a family, and did not have to pay capitation fees, or worry about his children's future. Consequently he could not experience misgiving, dissatisfaction and confusion. Without a wife, the chances of his sensing pleasure, gratification, joy and despair were fairly remote. He was a free man.

Removing the fig leaf from his face, he followed the road till he came to a set of small blurred signs. One said, India this way. Hard work. Third world. Low wages. No gazetted holidays. Caste and colour consciousness. No employment prospects. High pollution levels. Joint families. Organized crime. Dowry deaths. Plague. Bihar. Water borne diseases. Vastu shastras. Miss world contests. Gang rape. Bonded labour. One day cricket. Increasing national debt. World Bank projects.... India — one thousand miles. The other: Goa. Cheap wine. Reasonable non-vegetarian restaurants. Low rents. No parking problems. Beaches. Women and Feni.... Straight ahead. He quickened his pace....

**D**esigning the first human was only a minor achievement; creation of the universe entirely another. Brahma's sleep pattern determined the cycle of its birth and death. During the day, when he was in a good mood and behaving like a responsible citizen of the galaxy, all was well. But the minute he knocked-off after a heavy meal and Mrs Brahma's freshly brewed coffee, the world was reduced to chaos.

But the oscillation between order and chaos was by itself not enough. For the sake of further confusion, Brahma created the *Mahayugas*. The more memorable of the Mahayugas were the four stages within the earth's existence: the *Satya*, *Treta*, *Dwapar* and *Kali*.

Satyayuga was a great time, a golden age when civilizations flowered and matured. This was a time when the idea of *dharma* was prevalent. The world was full of peace and justice, duty, piety

and sacrifice and all the other synonyms listed under harmony in the new edition of Roget's Thesaurus. Everyone talked of moral obligation, the performance of one's God-given duty. At public forums, culture and social consciousness were discussed instead of politics and state elections. People indulged in civil obedience for pleasure and discussed filial piety at seminars. They were happy and virtuous, though many had this distinctly sanctimonious expression on their faces.

**D**uring this age, money was invented not as a medium of monetary exchange, but only so people could start up their rare coin and stamp collections. Ideas of macro-economic theory and the inflationary spiral were still a couple of Mahayugas away. Some people did amass wealth, but without making a grand show of it in fancy houses and foreign cars. People spoke to each other directly, without the aid of misleading intermediaries like newspapers, television, or international conferences. Since religion had still to be discovered, cultures were generally tolerant. People used the *puja* rooms in their simple, functionally designed houses for extra storage. All children attended government-run public schools; consequently the fancier boarding schools in the hills were converted to grain godowns for the rural areas. Artists worked quietly in their studios instead of attending workshops or organizing one-man-shows in New York. Purposeless activities like golf, advertising and the stock market had still not been discovered.

It was a time when countries threw up a range of culture-specific inventions. The Chinese invented gun powder; India came up with the number zero; some Europeans discovered gravity and buoyancy. A traditional family in Goa discovered the idea of beach condominiums, at much the same time as a Kashmiri family was working on the notion of the houseboat. Countries in South America discovered the rain forest as an important natural resource; those nearer the poles, the concept of ice. Generally speaking, Satyayuga was a period of frantic, though positive, activity. Being the first stage

of mankind's presence on earth, a lot remained to be done to make life comfortable so that future generations would have something to inherit.

But alas, the age lasted a mere 1.7 million years. And as people got less friendly, as religion, comprehensive medical insurance and newspaper journalism were born, everyone knew that the less enlightened age of Tretayuga had set in.

But the million years of Tretayuga were not altogether unsavoury. People were kind and gentle; even people from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh were tolerable. They chewed *paan* but didn't spit. Cigarettes were cheap and without luxury tax. There was a steady supply of foreign liquor in the market. Inflation rates were as low as divorce rates. Autorickshaws adhered to prescribed pollution standards. Their drivers haggled, but only with foreigners.... Corruption existed, but was limited to the cabinet and senior bureaucrats. People still dressed in home-spun cotton, though a range of all-natural dyes had been introduced. They still used forks and knives but had begun to save the good china for guests. Their staple was mostly brown sugar and whole-wheat. Vegetables were still the leafy green variety, but their cultivation had begun to include the use of pesticides.

**L**uckily, philosophy and the social sciences which tend to devalue human existence were still at the nascent stage. People could argue, but because their ideas lacked precedents they tended to be laughed out of social gatherings and international seminars. Definitions of rural illiteracy and urban poverty had still not appeared on the intellectual's agenda. It was not even easy to tell who had the money, who the brains. A general sense of ease and well-being pervaded the ghetto areas of the larger towns. People could walk about late in the long summer evenings, happy in the knowledge that mugging and bodily crimes, along with smack and cocaine, had been assigned to the next stage, the Dwaparyuga. Because of the natural trust between human beings, everyone left their houses open. In fact, the lock industry did not develop till the

early years of the Kaliyug. And the burglar alarm, private Haryanvi guard concepts and private detective services came much later.

Everyone loved the Tretayuga.

'Ya. Great stage, isn't it?'

'We are so lucky.'

'Such an equitable society....'

'No politics.'

'No BJP, no Congress.'

'No multiparty democracy.'

'No environmental legislation.'

'No police force.'

'No judiciary.'

'No anticipatory bail.'

'No consumer protection.'

As an equitable consumerist economy grew, a natural system of stratification formed. The caste system was a radical idea for the time. But in an age of social tolerance and general trust worthiness, it seemed the right time for its introduction.

**A**t the top of the scale the Brahmins were the happier executive lot. Flying about with first-class tickets, they had little to do but show their enlightened faces at child marriages and death ceremonies. According to the scriptures, they got to stay in large detached and semi-detached houses; they could eat at vegetarian restaurants and get away without leaving a tip. In public you could easily make out who they were by the way they sat in the Brahmins Only seats on public buses; or the way they threw their weight about against bonded labourers; and how they drank water without bringing the bottle to their lips....

Just below the Brahmins, by order of social merit, came the Kshatriyas, a disconsolate group whose sole purpose was defence. During times of peace their position as significant members of Hindu society was suspect. With little to do, they would hang around the city clubs and the Gymkhana, depleting their rum rations and counting the bravery medals they got at the last Republic Day Parade. Many of them had withdrawn from active warfare altogether and started up private protection services for the city's richer businessmen.

Expectedly the most important group in any given community is one which contributes to the people's daily physical perpetuation. In ancient India, the prominence of the Vaisyas could hardly be exaggerated. Made up primarily of gifted tradesmen and talented merchants, their primary role was that of middlemen. From the producer they would buy an item for a small sum and give it to the consumer at a large profit. This was a tedious, time-consuming task, and quite complicated because the producer and the consumer were one and the same. But they remained undaunted in the face of such difficulties.

**A**t the very bottom of the great social tree of life came the Scheduled Castes. Because of their particular designations at birth, they were assigned only the menial jobs of Hindu existence. Many joined the bureaucracy and became secretaries to the government; the really menial and culturally deviant enlisted in the diplomatic service. Some who chose to remain at home became brain surgeons at medical institutes. Since their inheritance was one of hardship, they were provided privileged posts which helped alleviate their earlier grim positions in life. Those who in childhood had washed the latrines in their Bihar village, were sent on government sponsored study tours of the Canadian Rockies; those who had spent their adolescence picking up carcasses on the ghats of Varanasi for sale in the city's used carcass market, were thought suitable candidates for state ministries in trade and tourism. Where there was a scheduled caste, there was a job available or made available.

Finally, there were the women. Being a volatile group, gender issues were only addressed obliquely during the Tretayuga. And anyone who wished to learn more about the status of women could seek information from the department of feminist affairs, a department originally intended to deal with animal welfare. Male leaders recognized that women had enormous powers of reason. And an innately superior intellect. They were therefore assigned duties like child-



birth and prime ministership, house-keeping and laundry. In the villages they occupied important posts as fuel and water procurers. Nobody really had it as good as the women.

**T**he first real forebodings of decline came during the Dwaparyuga, which luckily lasted only 800,000 years. People were still generally healthy, and did not need their bi-annual medical check-ups and vaccinations. Life insurance was still not popular. Some parts of the world had become infected by malaria and chicken pox. But these were mainly in the underdeveloped regions of Europe and North America, where the anemic whiter races lived. The greater evils of cancer, Doordarshan, heart disease, politics and Bombay films, were reserved for the next stage, the Kaliyuga.

On the domestic front things generally looked good. Photography had still not been discovered as a common pictorial medium and people were forced to carry their easels and paint brushes to picnics, if they wanted to make a record for the family album. The picnic itself was a relatively new and untried phenomenon and only a few of the senior company executives and their wives were invited to them. But even they did not stay for long as cricket had not yet seen the light of day. Two flavours of ice cream – chocolate and vanilla – had been invented, but with the fridge still a few million years away, the family packs had to be eaten in the parlour itself. The Ambassador car body had been designed but its engine was still several centuries away, which was terribly inconvenient if you wanted to get somewhere in a hurry. Many of the major automotive repair shops had to close down for lack of work.

Complete and total degeneration of mankind occurred in less than half a million years – which only goes to show that when the end comes, it comes swiftly. The first signs of Kaliyug could be seen across the darkened city streets, lit only by red lights, and the bright ring of young prostitutes on the nightly prowl: Assamese, Rajasthani, Punjabi and Tamil girls, their bodice slung high, cheeks highlighted by

street lamps, prices indicated on a menu card in their hand bag. During the day, intimations of Kaliyug were similarly visible in the subdued ring of daytime prostitutes, hiding their heads in the shadows of non-descript bungalows. White kurtas slung low over heaving bellies, faces creased by years of public gratification, their prices were all in good round figures: Rs 5 lakh – government job; Rs 50 lakh – government house; Rs 2 crores – industrial licence....

But the sense of decadence could best be gauged by declining quality. Soap was less effective in cleaning and washing. Watches shone in the dark and gave indications of air pressure, wind speed, and temperature, not time. Architects designed and built structures that fell apart as soon as the occupants moved in. Tailors stitched suits that gave way even before the dry-cleaner could get at them. Cholesterol and fat-free oils became a staple of dining room conversation while politics and the share market enlivened the discussions in second class train carriages. People realized that information could be transmitted across continents via satellite, but you still had to wait for a table at your favourite Mughlai restaurant.

**L**ife began to take on a contradictory tone. Newspapers began to write on terrorism in the Kashmir valley on the front page and tourist treks in the Kashmir valley on the back page. After a while it was difficult to distinguish between a harmless terrorist and a murderous tourist. Cities, built on variety, began to be inhabited by people of similar likes and dislikes. The Punjabis began to isolate themselves into enclaves called Punjabi Bagh; the Jews preserved their identity in Jewtown; the Bengalis in Chittaranjan Park. It became necessary for a shy, married, orthodox, Gujarati chartered accountant couple with two children and a Vespa scooter to live next to another shy, married, orthodox Gujarati chartered accountant couple with two children and a Vespa scooter. This was life lived at the edge.

During Kaliyug, intention began to supersede action and it became more

important to show that you care than to actually care. It was more important to organize a festival of rural crafts than to worry about the living condition of the craftsmen; an international conference on depleting rain forests was more important than the depleting tree cover down the road. The symbolic act was a far more critical measure of society's gains than any sort of real accomplishment.

**K**aliyug was a time when the wholeman just ceased to exist. He became a final reference point in God's own cultivated anxiety. Unable to answer intelligent questions about the world he lived in, he turned inwards, to solutions that lay dormant in some imprecise layer of his brain. For a while, he turned into a spiritual person – a human being asking difficult three-part questions at public gatherings. But he was unable to wait for the answers because there was a cricket match that afternoon, a possible merger at the Golf Club....

His father had put up the steel mill and power plant; but he had been reduced to an item within the industrial process. He had become a half-breed, a twilight creature, part man, part skin, part microchip; his identity was carried in a packetful of cards, phones and processed memories. A cloned hybrid of universal cells in a human form, he was a man without blood or reflection. And he belonged to no place. Suspended between continents, he was comfortable only in the company of blue-suited Japanese and Koreans assessing net worths and labour capacities, part of a wholly new colonizing civilization, one whose forces were more conspicuous, less charitable than anything he had known.

But he tried desperately to imbibe the slogans that would make him whole again – the frantic gestures and improbable rules of the place he made his home. He knew there were deficiencies in his understanding, but as long as he knew the legend of Ram and Ayodhya, and as long as he could show the right doses of deference to the scriptures and the country's constitution, he would survive. He was an Indian. Born to post-indepen-

dent India, to a place made free for him, he was only exercising his own prerogatives into freedom.

So he became a modern-day hero — an Indian without ideals. He learned to cherish all that was of value to the new India: money, air-conditioned Contessas, videos, microwave ovens, bank lockers, a Haryanvi guard for the house — all the sophisticated buttressings that helped promote the cause of his own middle class life. There was no other way. It was more important to earn, even if in evil ways, than carry the mantle of some half-baked proposition into an uncertain arena of national idealism. To save the country's millions, to work out some solutions to low-cost shelter on moral grounds, or do something as archaic as believe in the country was old Gandhian madness. Moral grounds would come more naturally when there was a chicken roasting silently in the microwave. Belief in the country was possible when you could recline on the plastic-covered sofa sipping whisky, knowing fully well that your accountant could turn even a fake receipt from the bootlegger into an untaxable asset.

In the drawing-room it was easy to fall prey to the seductions of the world. India as historical territory, India as an intellectual idea, were far more palatable than India as degraded democracy, India as twentieth-century failure. Amidst the deep polished oak bookcases lined with large picture texts of Chagall and Miro, mixing freely with Indian miniatures and Husains, he became the tweed-coated man, the chiffon-clad woman discussing in hushed tones intimations of profits and loss, the unrest of labour unions, the return of the Congress party. Buttressed by the sight of Rajasthani paintings and mirror-work cushions from Gujarat, all was well. India, that tiresome stretch of despair and dereliction, was far away.

Brahma sighed. He knew the only thing that would make life worthwhile was man's complete absence from this earth. The idea of man was good while it lasted, but like all good ideas it had outlived its usefulness. Leaning forward he flicked the red switch. The flood gates opened, and the water poured in.

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# Index

## SEMINAR ISSUES 1996

SEMINAR 437: January 1996; **INDIA 1995**: a symposium on the year that was.

Ahmad, Aijaz	Globalization and the nation-state
Baxi, Upendra	Power and social action
Chaudhuri, Mrinal Datta	Liberalisation without reform
Hazarika, Sanjoy	India's far east
John, Binoo K.	Publish and not be damned
Joshi, Murli Manohar	Not a drop to drink
Karnad, Bharat	Much ado about Kashmir
Khare, Harish	Ten headlines in search of a regime
Kothari, Rajni	Desperate times
Menon, Nivedita	Destabilizing feminism
Mishra, Amaresh	The mid-nineties
Nair, Rukmini Bhaya	Why does Rushdie offend
Ninan, T.N.	Growing appetite, belied expectations
Rajan, Rashmi Pachauri	In search of direction
Rao, S.L.	Muddling along, modestly
Roy, Duinu	And green is the colour of blood
Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul	Défence alert
Sanghvi, Vir	Shall the lotus bloom
Sridharan, E.	Coalition politics
Thukral, Enakshi Ganguly	A worm's eye view
Tripathy, Ratnakar	Wheels within reels

SEMINAR 438: February 1996; **GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE**: a symposium on the proposal for a biomass-based society.

Antia, N.H.	Health and panchayati raj
Gadgil, Madhav and P.R. Seshagiri Rao	The problem
Gupta, Anil K.	Must conservators remain poor?
Kurien, John	People and the sea
Lélé, Sharachchandra	Environmental governance
Parameswaran, M.P.	A participative democracy
Rangarajan, Mahesh	Of people, power and nature
Sen, Gita	Shifting boundaries
Sengupta, Nirmal	On purpose and policies

SEMINAR 439: March 1996; **PRISONS AND PUNISHMENT**: a symposium on confinement, punitive institutions and penal reform.

Baxi, Upendra	An unfought battle for human dignity
Dasgupta, Ananya	Little expectations
Kakar, Sanjiv	Interview with Kiran Bedi
Mudgal, Mukul	Do prisoners have rights
Shankardass, Rani Dhavan	A nexus of two patriarchies
_____	Constructing a punitive device
Visvanathan, Shiv	An ode to the prison

SEMINAR 440: April 1996; **THE ELECTION CARNIVAL**: a symposium on issues, thoughts and theories around the 1996 elections.

deSouza, Peter R.	The accountability factor
Ghosh, Sailendra Nath	Why we must vote
Ilaiah, Kancha	Wine, women and vote
Nagaraj, D.R.	Politics as witchcraft
Nigam, Aditya	From inquisition to citizenship
Pande, Ira	Interview with Sushma Swaraj
Pratap, Vijay	Growing up as a socialist
Sethi, Harsh	To be or not to be
Singh, M.P.	After Congress what?
Singh, Rustam	Reflections on a form
Sopariwala, Dorab	Feeling the pulse
Sridharan, E.	State funding of elections
Vidyadharan, M.P.	Interview with Jaipal Raddy
Visvanathan, Shiv	Thinking about elections
Yadav, Yogendra	Electoral reforms: beyond middle class fantasies

SEMINAR 441: May 1996; **A QUESTION OF RIGHTS**: a symposium on the proposal for a uniform civil code.

Agnes, Flavia	The politics of women's rights
Chatterjee, P.C.	Civil code: uniform or common
Chatterji, Jyotsna	Towards an Indian family law
Dhagamwar, Vasudha	The problem

Ete, Jarjum Empowering women  
 Gupta, Kanchan Towards an equal social order  
 Haksar, Nandita The political issues  
 Jindal, Manjula The relevance of secularism  
 Kannabiran, K.G. Whose code is it anyway?  
 Lateef, Shahida The communal agenda  
 Murmu, Emami Where have all the flowers gone?  
 Sagade, Jaya A common adoption law  
 Singh, Kirti Combatting communalism  
 Working Group on Women's Rights Equal laws for women

SEMINAR 442: June 1996; **NATIONALISM**: a symposium on religion and nation in post-Ayodhya India.

Devji, Faisal Fatehali Hindu/Muslim/Indian  
 Jaffrelot, Christophe Of nations and nationalism  
 Nanda, B.R. Roots of Indian nationalism  
 Pande, Ira and B. Wariavwalla Interview with Qurratulain Hyder  
 Shah, Ramesh Chandra The coward and the bully  
 Sundaram, Ravi Beyond nationalism  
 Wariavwalla, Bharat The problem

SEMINAR 443: July 1996; **LITTLE VOICES, BIG ISSUES**: a symposium on children and childhood.

Balasundaram, Pramila My mind does not work, you see...  
 Dutta, Aneeta Where fetters lie hidden  
 Gautama, Sumitra M. My life, my dreams  
 Jasmeeta Out of the mouths of babes  
 Joshi, Anuradha Let inner rhythms grow  
 K., Kavitha Homeless alone  
 Mehrotra, Deepti Priya The problem  
 Rahul Creating a new demonology  
 Rampal, Anita and Tultul Biswas Children voice concern  
 Rao, Rukmini How long can I continue to be different  
 Rohtagi, Jolly Learning from children  
 Unnikrishnan, Namita Is Michael Jackson god?

SEMINAR 444: August 1996; **NUCLEAR FALLOUT**: a symposium on the debate around India's nuclear options.

Bajpai, Kanti Secure without the bomb  
 Bhaskar, Chitrapu Uday Dispelling some myths  
 Bidwai, Praful The problem  
 Dixit, J.N. The moment of truth  
 Karnad, Bharat The quality of 'expert' advice  
 Malhotra, Jyoti Play it again, Sam  
 Mattoo, Amitabh Does public opinion matter?  
 Mian, Zia Hegemonic nuclear ideas  
 Poulose, T.T. Big boy games

Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul Securing India's option  
 Vanaik, Achin Indian security and the nuclear question

SEMINAR 445: September 1996; **THE OTHER CITY**: a symposium on the haphazard growth of our urban areas.

Ahmad, S. Sami The crisis in municipal services  
 Bhatia, Gautam The problem  
 Correa, Charles India Inc.  
 Datta, Partho Empathising with a colonial past  
 Gupta, Narayani Anderun-e-fasil shahar  
 Maitra, Asesh Kumar How rivers die  
 Parthasarathi, Vibodh and Pooja Kaul The 'missing' city  
 Patel, Shirish B. Tackling Mumbai's slums  
 Ravindran, K.T. Why planning failed  
 Sarkar, Rinki Interview with William Goldsmith  
 Shafi, Sayed S. Whither urban transport?  
 Shankardass, Mala K. The 'third wave' option  
 Srinivas, Smriti A home of one's own  
 On the religious imagination of the city

SEMINAR 446: October 1996; **CULTURAL STUDIES**: a symposium on culture and power.

Deshpande, Satish Anti anti-economism  
 Dhareshwar, Vivek Valorizing the present  
 Ghosh, Anjan The problem  
 Guha-Thakurta, Tapati The travesties of our modern art institutions  
 John, Mary E. Feminism, culture and the politics of signification  
 Kulkarni, Mangesh Action groups and the state  
 Prasad, M. Madhava A speculative montage  
 Sinha, Dipankar Information inequality

SEMINAR 447: November 1996; **REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**: a symposium on changing approaches to population planning.

Bose, Ashish Eradicating 'targetitis'  
 George, Annie Understanding sexuality  
 Jejeebhoy, Shireen J. Adolescent sexuality and fertility

Khan, M.E., John W. Townsend.

Ranjana Sinha and Seema Lakhanpal Sexual violence within marriage  
 Kumar, Sanjeev Involving the male  
 Pachauri, Saroj Interview with Saleem Shervani  
 Ramachandran, Vimala The problem  
 Ramasundaram, S. NGOs in the time of globalisation  
 Ravindran, T.K. Sundari New indicators  
 From rhetoric to action

**Venketaram, Shree** Voices from the field  
**Visaria, Leela** Goals and modalities of research

SEMINAR 448: December 1996; **MARITIME SECURITY**: a symposium on the growing importance of the Indian Ocean.

**Bateman, Sam** Australian perceptions  
**Bédi, Rahul** The forgotten force  
**Cheema, Pervaiz Iqbal** Naval threat to Pakistan  
**Gooneratne, John** Caught between two cold wars  
**Kasturi, Bhashyam** Patterns of conflict  
**Kumar, Kishore** A community in cooperation  
**Mills, Greg** South African maritime interests  
**Mitra, Arabinda** India in Antarctica  
**Mohan, C. Raja** The myth of collective security  
**Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul** The problem  
**Sharma, O.P.** Changing laws of the sea

#### FURTHER READINGS

**Batra, Tripta and Poonam Batra** Little Voices, Big Issues  
**Garkoti, Umesh C.** The Other City  
**Ghosal, Satyabrata** Cultural Studies  
**Gulati, Sunita** A Question of Rights  
**Iyer, Prema** Nationalism  
**Narang, Ameeta** Grassroots Governance  
**Ramanathan, Usha and Nimmi Pandey** Nuclear Fallout  
**Roy-Chaudhury, Rahul** Prisons and Punishment  
**Seminarist** Maritime Security  
**Seminarist** Reproductive Health  
**Seminarist** The Election Carnival

#### COMMENT

**D. Anand** Clichés in communication for health care (November '96)  
**Shail Mayaram** Who broke the idols? (August '96)  
**Kalpna Sharma** A woman of courage (June '96)  
**V. Sitaramam** Two mango trees (June '96)  
**Badri Narayan Tiwari** On dalit consciousness (June '96)  
**Ruth Vanita** Thinking beyond gender in India (October '96)

#### SEMINAR ISSUES

##### 1959

1. The Party in Power 2. Food for Forty Crores  
 3. Freedom and Planning 4. The Changing Village

##### 1960

5. Co-operative Farming 6. Two Sectors 7. Our Universities 8. Corruption 9. Films 10. Indians in Africa

India 1996

11. A Language for India 12. Health 13. The Third World  
 14. Tribal India 15. Into Space 16. Artists and Art

##### 1961

17. Socialism Today 18. The Census 19. Our Foreign Policy 20. Waste 21. The Writer at Bay 22. Administration 23. North and South 24. Communalism  
 25. Philosophy 26. Science 27. Advertising 28. Music

##### 1962

29. Your Vote 30. Our Democracy 31. The U.N. 32. On Stage 33. Population Control 34. Election Analysis  
 35. India's Defence 36. The Scientist 37. Our Neighbours  
 38. Indian Agriculture 39. Past and Present 40. Romanisation

##### 1963

41. The Emergency 42. The Press 43. Taxation 44. Crisis on the Campus 45. Non-Alignment 46. Gandhism  
 47. Censorship 48. India and Pakistan 49. Panchayati Raj 50. China 51. Emerging Leadership 52. The Indian Woman

##### 1964

53. The Coming Crisis 54. Worker's Share 55. Scientific Attitude 56. India in the World 57. Needs and Resources 58. Kashmir 59. Jawaharlal Nehru  
 60. Prohibition 61. Energy 62. The Consumer 63. Nehru and the Ism 64. Our Changing Values.

##### 1965

65. The Bomb 66. Parliament in Crisis 67. Secularism  
 68. Language 69. Goa 70. Caste 71. At School  
 72. Public Sector 73. Indo-Soviet Link 74. Money and Power 75. The War and After 76. Politics of Language

##### 1966

77. We and the World 78. The Plan 79. Our Cities  
 80. Elections and Power 81. Farms and Food 82. Science in Afro-Asia 83. India's Defence Pattern 84. The I.C.S.  
 85. The Administrative Jungle 86. Aid or Trade 87. State Politics 88. Students in Turmoil

##### 1967

89. Your Vote 90. Our Union 91. The Economic Crisis  
 92. Our Brain Drain 93. The Cow 94. Election Outcome  
 95. Power Patterns 96. Asian Security 97. Books  
 98. Mass Communication 99. Design for Living  
 100. Seminar on Seminar

##### 1968

101. Prices 102. Unctad 103. Recession 104. The Future of Asia 105. The Budget and The Plan 106. Minority in Crisis 107. Politics and Society 108. Agricultural Revolution 109. Management Challenge 110. Our Security  
 111. The Centre and the State 112. Academic Colonialism





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113. The New Left 114. Resources 115. Nationhood 116. Violence 117. Pakistan 118. Gerontocracy 119. Our External Relations 120. The Educated Unemployed 121. The Congress Party 122. Mahatma Gandhi 123. Conservation 124. Our Political Parties

## 1970

125. Secularism in Crisis 126. Our Libraries 127. India's Left 128. Modernisation 129. The Rural Base 130. Population Planning 131. Foreign Technology 132. Nation and Community 133. The Super Powers 134. The U.N. at 25 135. Two Neighbours 136. The Constitution

## 1971

137. India 1970 138. Your Vote 139. Political Pointers 140. Land Hunger 141. The Blue Revolution 142. Bangladesh 143. The Economic Agenda 144. The 1971 Elections 145. China Today 146. A Nuclear India 147. Crisis in the Press 148. Acapoltics

## 1972

149. India 1971 150. Impact of Bangladesh 151. Secret Societies 152. West Bengal 153. State Elections 154. Permits and Licenses 155. India in Asia 156. Decentralisation 157. The Social Sciences 158. New Education 159. Clean Elections 160. The Mass Line

## 1973

161. India 1972 162. Mass Housing 163. Calcutta 164. Federal Reorganisation 165. The Status of Women 166. Our Paralysed Universities 167. Garibi Hatao 168. A Committed Civil Service 169. Science Policy 170. No-Cost Reform 171. Mass Transport 172. The Indian Economy

## 1974

173. India 1973 174. Indian Muslims 175. Population Threat 176. The Students Speak 177. The Untouchables 178. Marxism and India 179. The Multinationals 180. The Architect in India 181. The Indian Ocean 182. The Energy Crisis 183. Growing the Food 184. The Cinema Situation

## 1975

185. India 1974 186. Foreign Policy 187. A Changed India 188. Inflation 189. Prices and Procurement 190. Medicines for the Masses 191. Urbanisation 192. The System 193. The Economists 194. The Legacy of Gandhi 195. Global Problems 196. Judgements

## 1976

197. India 1975 198. The Economic Debate 199. New Trends 200. Life and Living 201. Changing Commu-

nism 202. A Military View 203. Where Do We Go From Here

SEMINAR issue numbers 204 to 209 were not printed because of censorship during the Emergency

## 1977

210. Fear and Freedom 211. Images of the Emergency 212. The Elections 213. The Correctives 214. Atrocities 215. Rethinkings 216. The Janata Phase 217. External Alignments 218. The Police 219. Action Agendas 220. Bengal Scenario

## 1978

221. India 1977 222. Indian Intellectuals 223. Economic Imperatives 224. Populist Politics 225. Defence and Detente 226. Federal Power Balance 227. The Rural Challenge 228. The Sixth Plan 229. New Dialogues 230. The Administrator 231. Trauma of the Triangle 232. Another TV

## 1979

233. India 1978 234. Grassroots Democracy 235. The Village and The Communicator 236. Emerging Questions 237. Threatened Environment 238. Politics of Science 239. The Autonomy Myth 240. The Muslim Condition 241. The Election Business 242. Our Fractured Politics 243. Harijans 244. Economic Scenarios

## 1980

245. India 1979 246. External Action 247. The Planets 248. Transition Politics 249. Development Dimensions 250. The Violent Present 251. Debating an Agenda 252. Policing 253. The Dangerous Decade 254. Studying our Society 255. Raw Power 256. Alternatives in Foreign Policy

## 1981

257. India 1980 258. A Failed Science 259. The Politicians 260. Parliament 261. Concepts in Change 262. Levels of Consciousness 263. The World of Microprocessors 264. Search for Consensus 265. The Soviet Connection 266. Confusion in Economics 267. Peasants and Prices 268. Reservations

## 1982

269. India 1981 270. The Arming of a Sub-continent 271. India: Seen from Abroad 272. The Campus Scene 273. Refocussings 274. Nepali Reflections 275. Childhood Today 276. Our National Character 277. Searching for Answers 278. The Future of Politics 279. Playing Games 280. A Confused World

## 1983

281. India 1982 282. Three Hundred Millions 283. The

Parallel Economy 284. Revivalism 285. Breakdown 286. Global Choices 287. Security 288. The Political Options 289. Federal Focus 290. Islam 291. Social Dilemmas 292. The Messy Media

#### 1984

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#### CORRECTION

In our issue on Maritime Security (448), November 1996, the article 'India in Antarctica' was written by Arabinda Mitra (not Arvind Mitra). Our apologies to the author.



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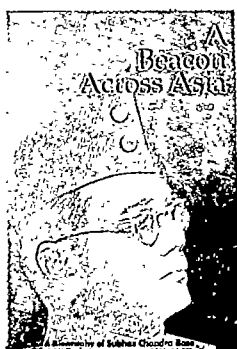
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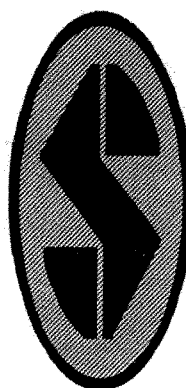
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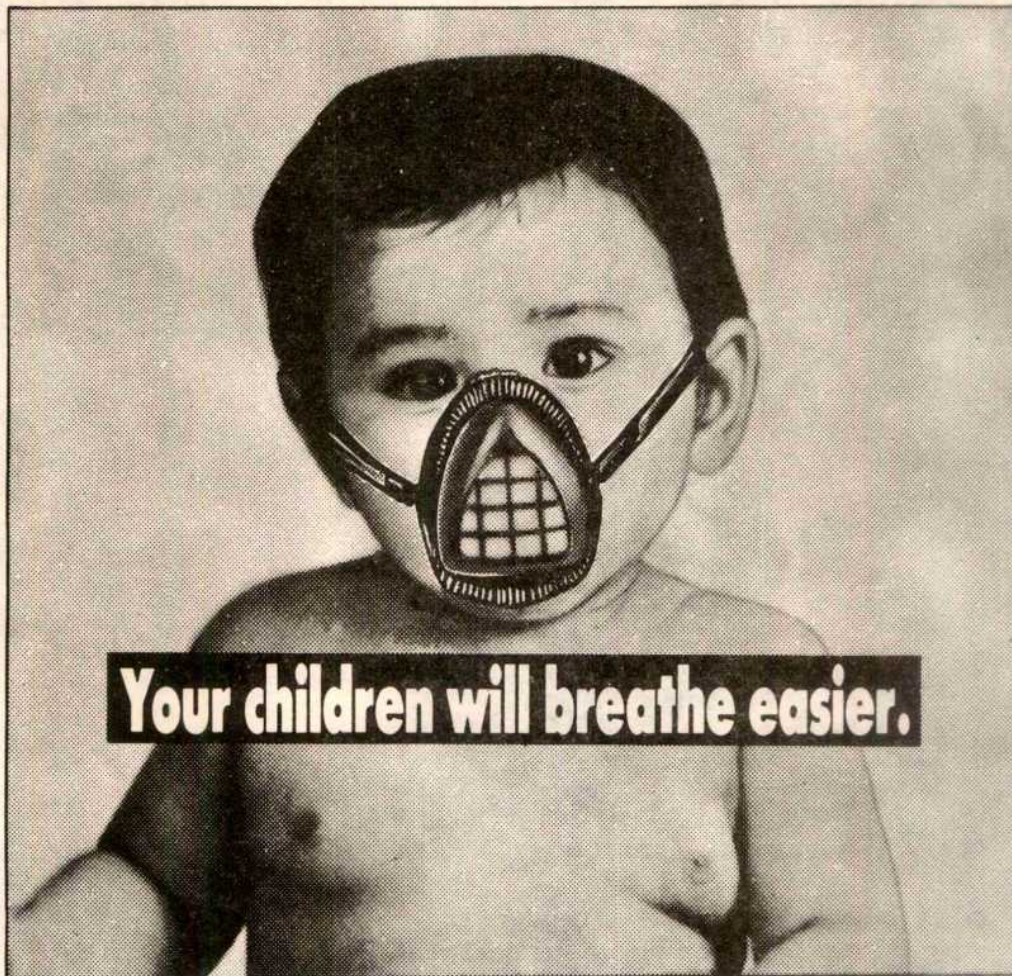
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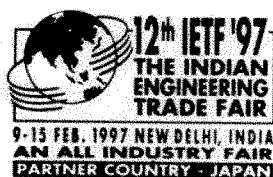
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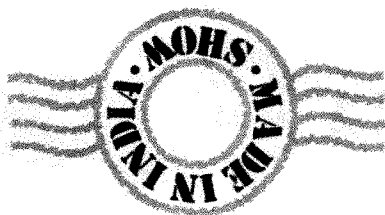
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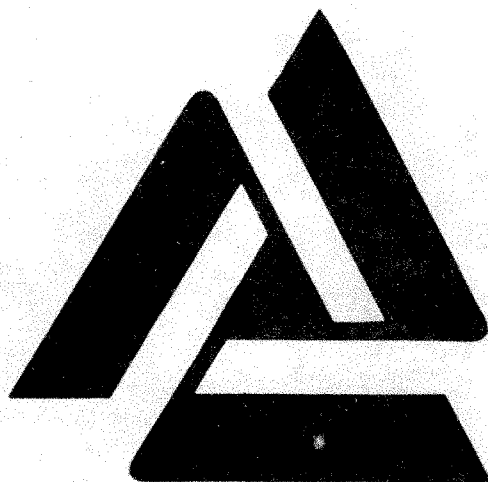


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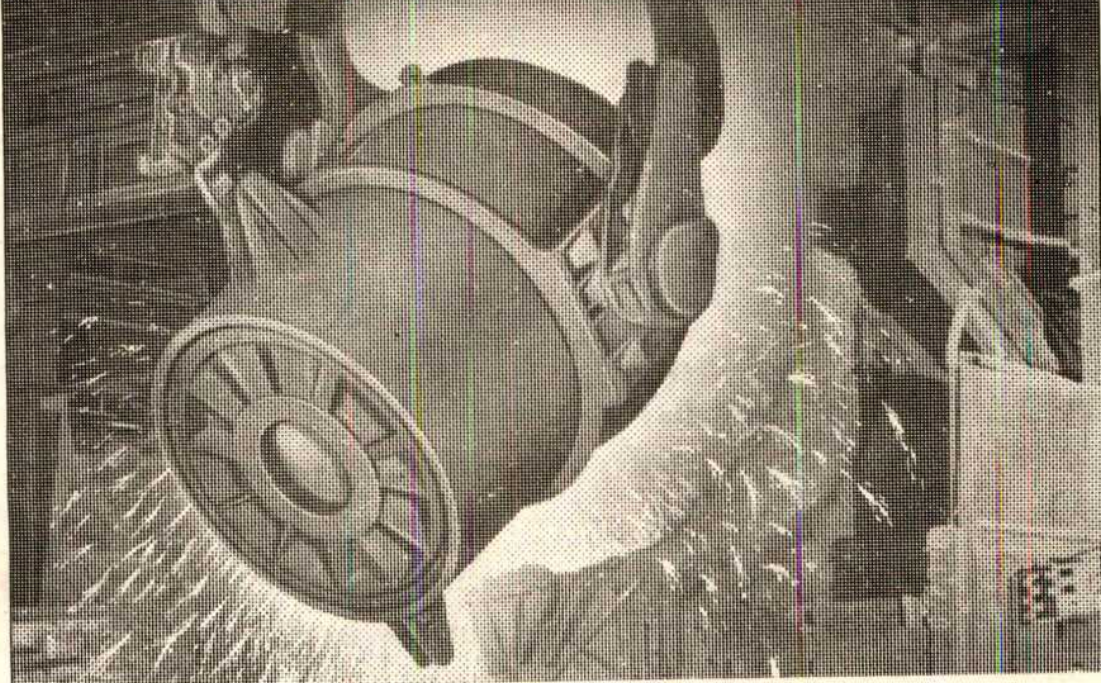
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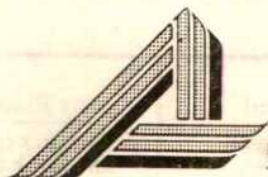
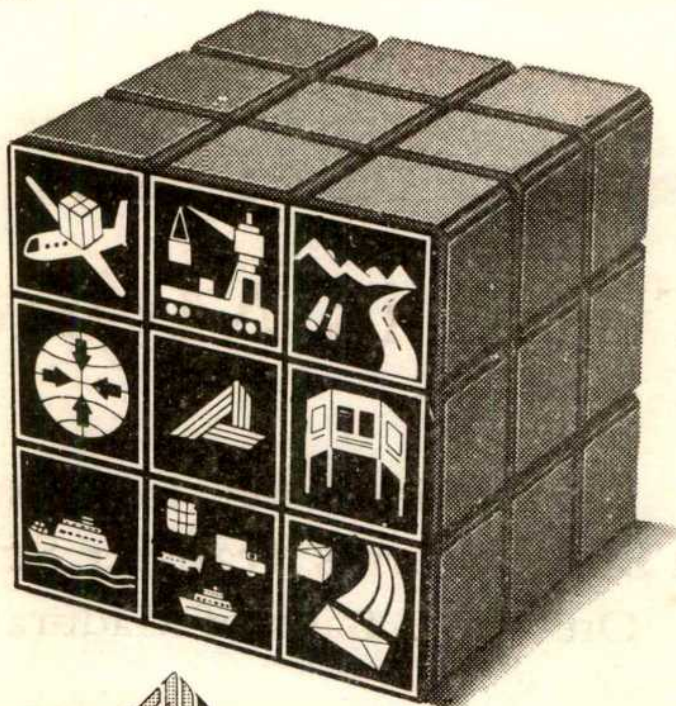
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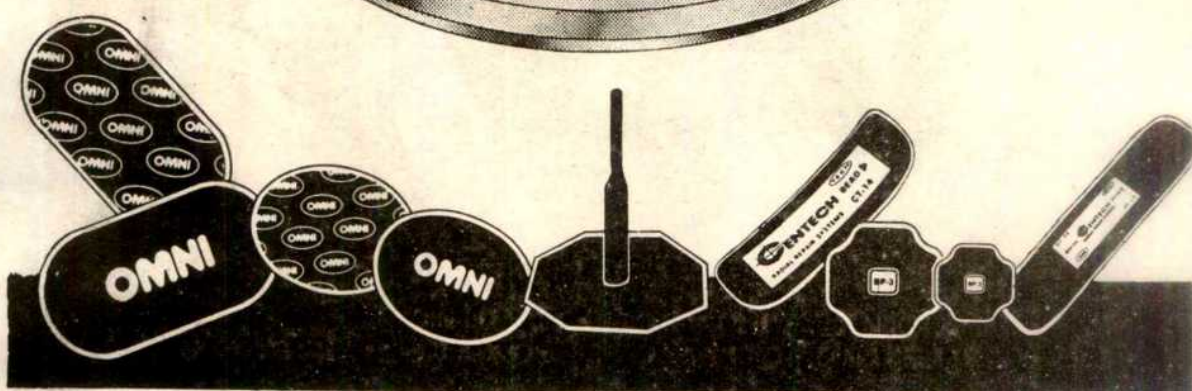


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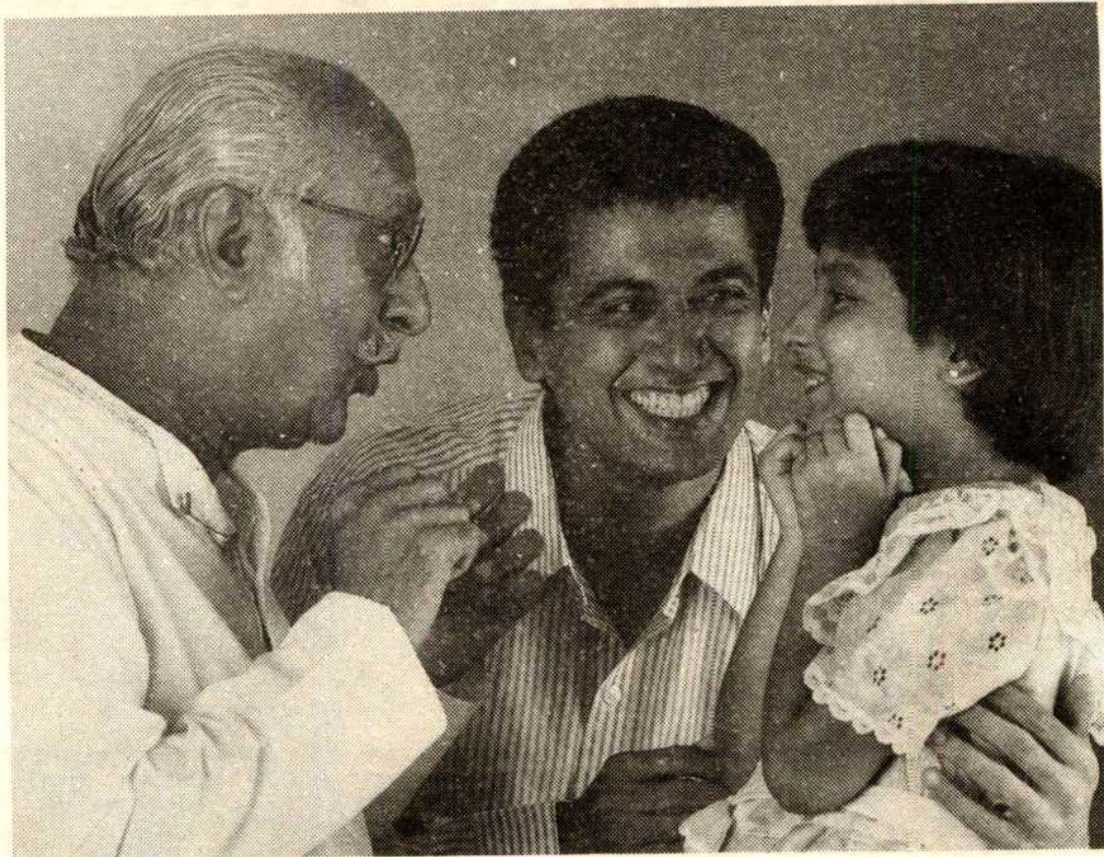
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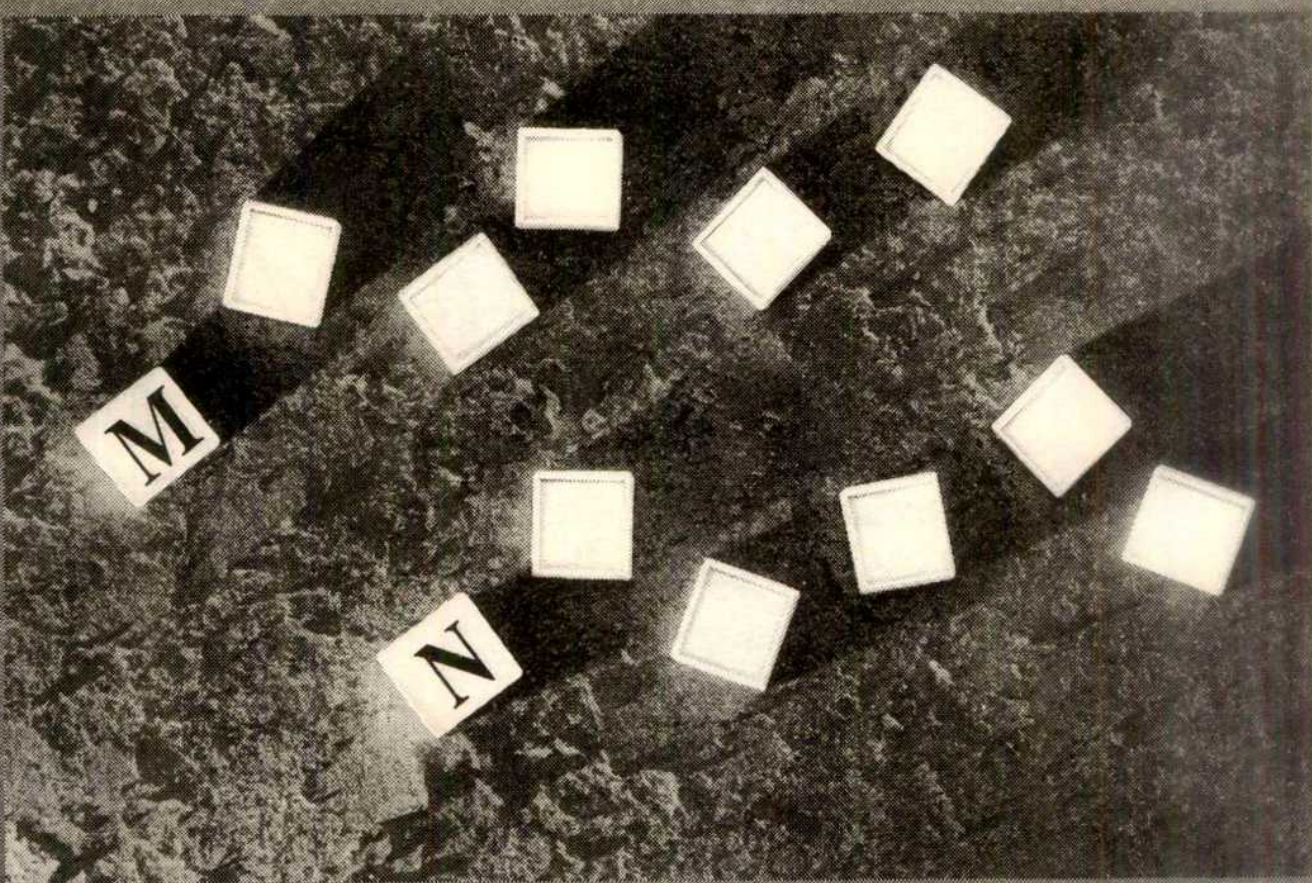
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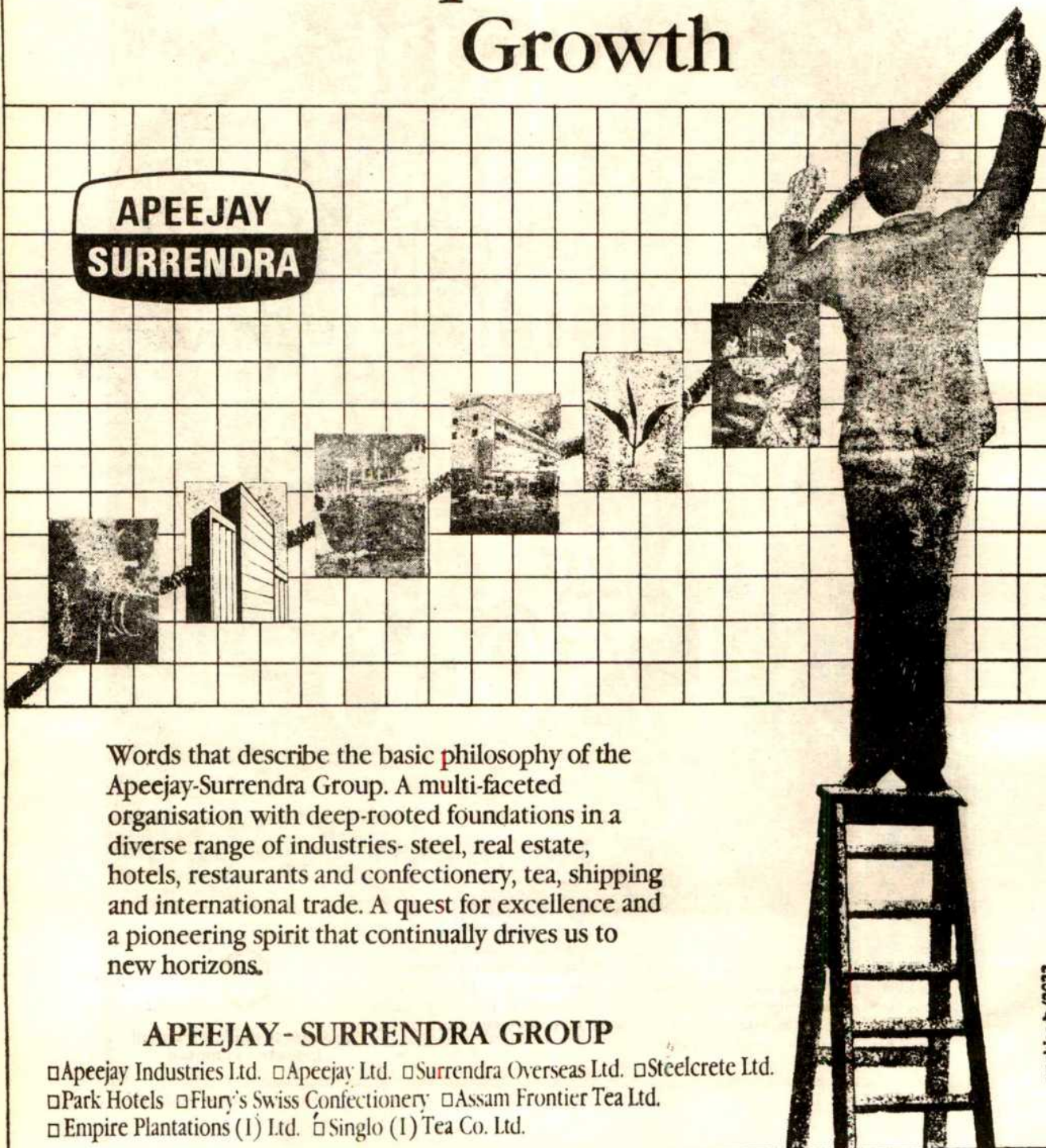
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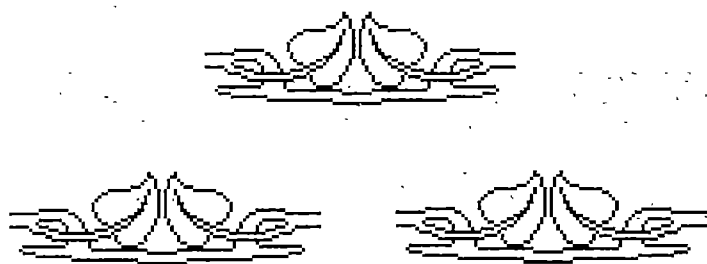
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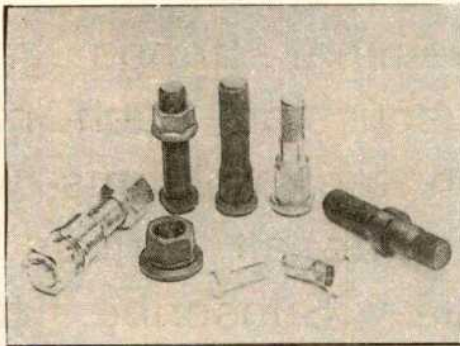
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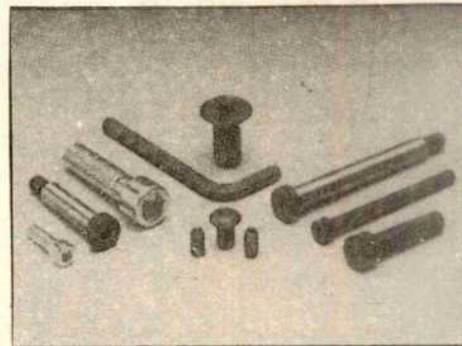
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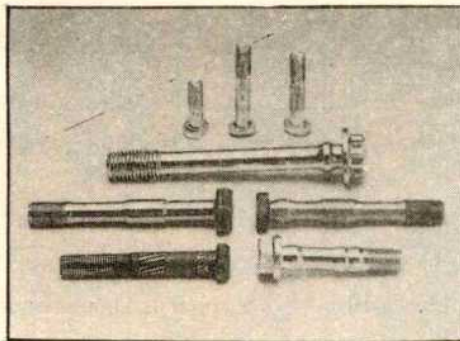
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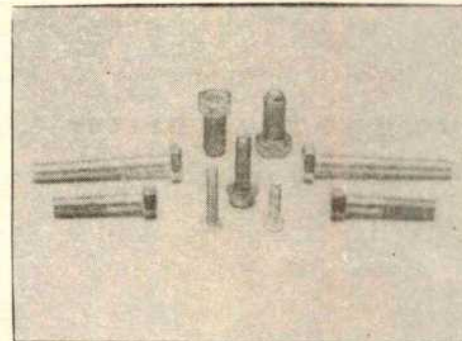
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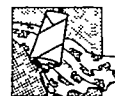
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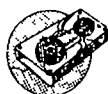
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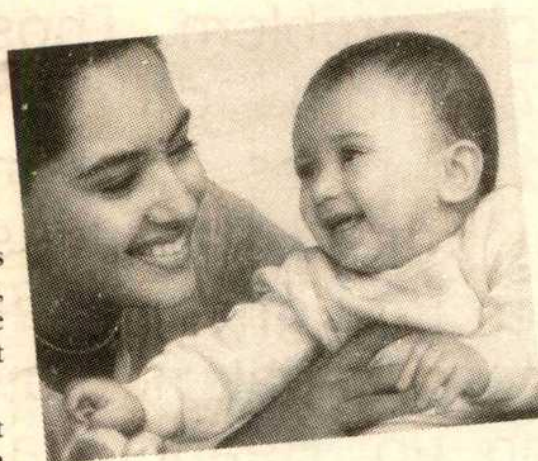
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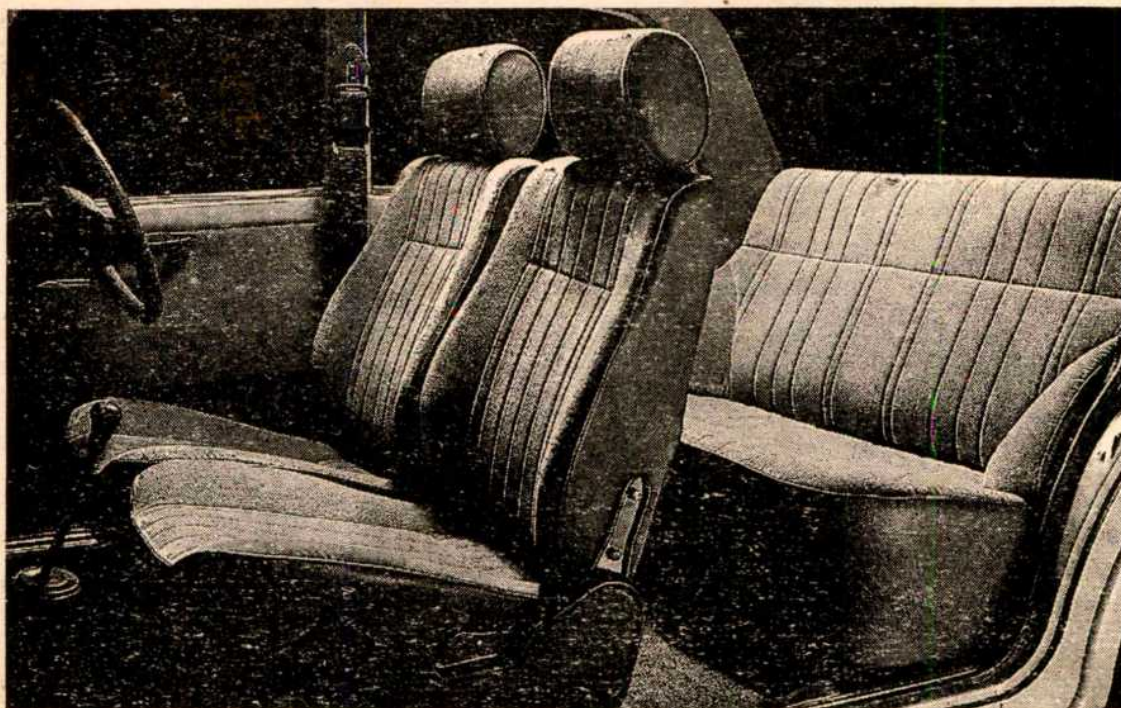
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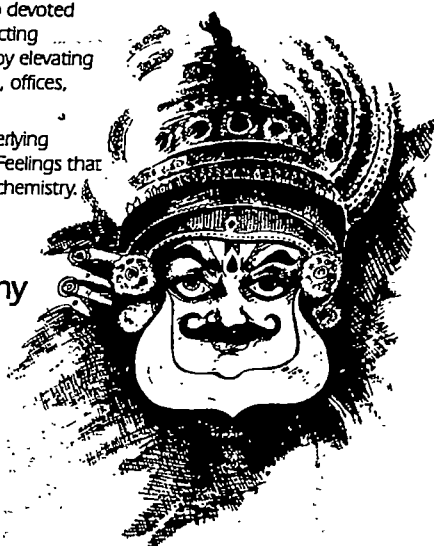
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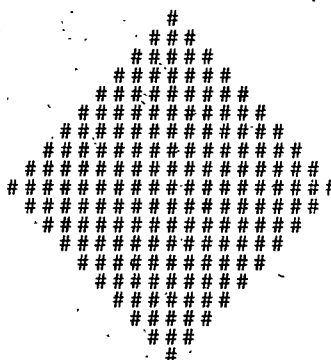
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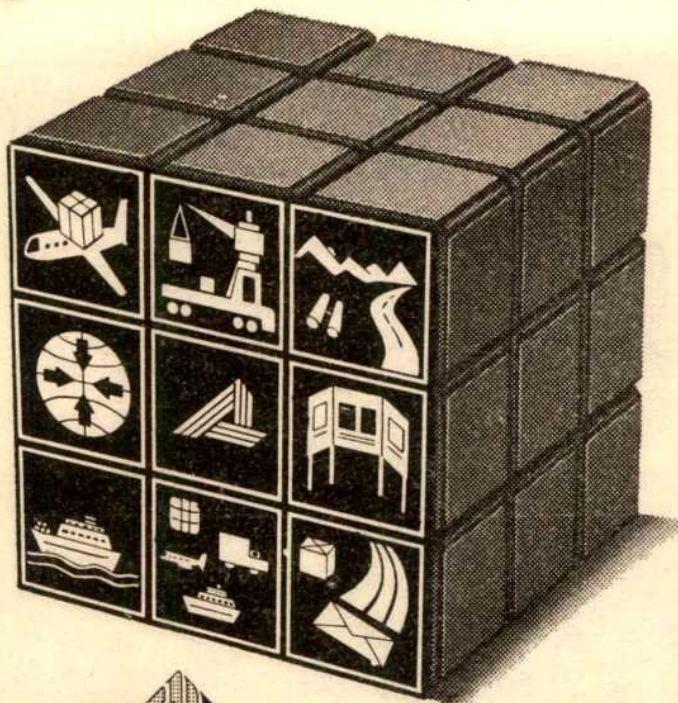


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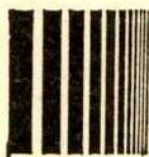
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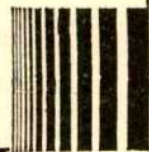
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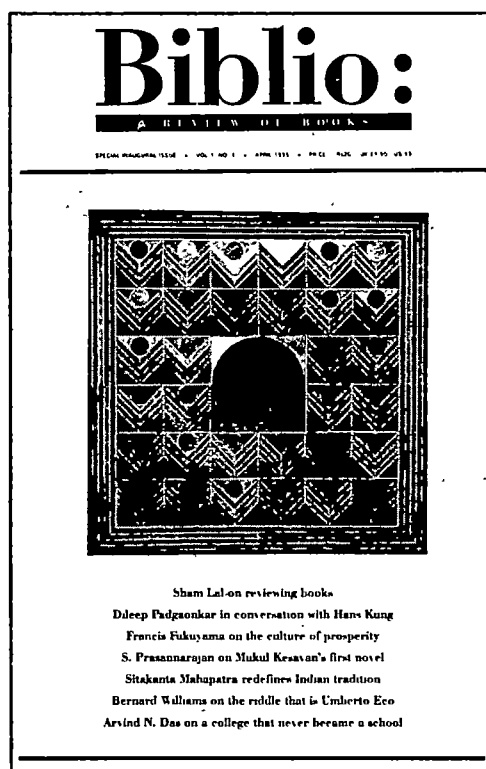
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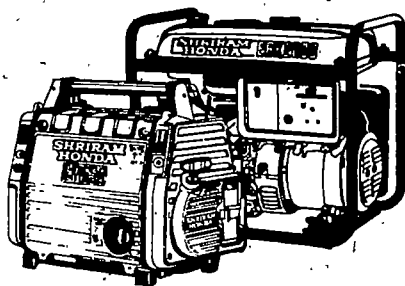
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- 12 THE PROBLEM**  
Posed by Pankaj Mishra, writer and publisher, Delhi
- 14 WHO IS A BIHARI?**  
Meenakshi Mukherjee, Professor of English,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi
- 17 SHADOWS OF THE POLTERGEISTS**  
Arun Sinha, Editor, 'The Navhind Times', Panjim, Goa
- 20 PARA-BANKING AND PARA-POLITICS**  
Arvind N. Das, historian and journalist with APCA, Delhi
- 23 THE ENIGMA THAT IS BIHAR ECONOMY**  
Shaibal Gupta, A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies,  
Patna
- 28 BIHAR REVISITED**  
Nikesh Sinha, Management Consultant, Delhi
- 31 THE CHANGING VILLAGE**  
Sachchidananda, Director, Sulabh Institute of  
Development Studies, Patna
- 34 BIHAR: OLD AND NEW**  
A.K. Lal, Reader in Political Science,  
A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna
- 37 A LAND CALLED MITHILA**  
Hetukar Jha, Professor of Sociology, Patna University
- 42 ARE BIHARIS UNEDUCATED?**  
Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, Asian Development  
Research Institute, Ranchi
- 45 INTERVIEW**  
With Chaturanan Mishra, Union Minister of Agriculture,  
by Ashok K. Singh, News-Editor, TVI, Delhi
- 47 CHANGING IMAGES OF CASTE AND POLITICS**  
Walter Hauser, Professor Emeritus of History,  
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
- 53 ANATOMY OF A MASSACRE**  
Bela Bhatia, activist and research scholar,  
University of Cambridge, UK
- 61 BOOKS**  
Reviewed by Swapan Dasgupta, Ashok K. Singh,  
Savyasaachi, Harsh Sethi, Sangeeta Dasgupta and  
Padmanabh Samarendra
- 67 FURTHER READING**  
A select and relevant bibliography  
compiled by Sunita Gulati, IIPA
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## The problem

FOR the modernizing classes of India, Bihar has long been the dreaded future: the dystopic reality which we were destined to inhabit if we weren't careful enough. Or, to change metaphors, it was the lower-class misfit with criminal tendencies in a schoolroom full of middle class upstarts. 'Look at him,' others would whisper among themselves, 'that is what happens when...'. One hears less of that kind of talk in our jaded, cynical republic. And not because Bihar has improved its grades. It is because the last few scandal-infested years have made Bihar look less like a freak phenomenon, a special case of blight on the fair face of India.

The Vohra committee report indicates a degree of turpitude previously unheard of in Indian politics; the antics of 'Virgin Mary' Jayalalitha and her *bhai-bandhus* propose a new scale of assessment for Laloo Prasad Yadav. Similarly, Harshad Mehta and V.K. Jain too may have performed a valuable public service by suggesting the possibility that far from being disownable Bihar is Us. Or, We are Bihar.

The mythology of Bihar as the Fourth World has long been with us, created by focusing, exclusively on most occasions, on what a scholar has called 'the unremitting topology of misery'. Unlike Bengal – another victim of

misery-mongers, but whose cultural riches have been hard to ignore – Bihar has remained a cultural and intellectual black hole. Extreme poverty and suffering lurks unconscionably in the foreground of every book, film or play set in Bihar. Only in passing is reference ever made to the state's splendid past, to the fact that from these presumed wastelands arose India's first empire as well as the world's greatest pacifist religion. It is here that the secular history of India began with the establishment of Sotas Janpadas, the wanderings of Buddha, and the simultaneous quest for a meaningful existence without recourse to other-worldly beings. Bihar was also the site for the development of Prakrit literature and some of India's greatest sculpture; where the first attempt to organise society along secular lines was made under Chanakya and Chandragupta.

The problem lies in locating continuities between present-day Bihar and the Bihar in which the Arthashastra was written. Much of the discourse about Bihar splits into two. There is the history of a great secular adventure which begins in the ancient era and carries into the medieval age with Sher Shah Suri. It continues right until 1857 when Indo-Persian high culture enters into an unprecedented alliance with tribal and lower-class assertiveness.

The other story concerns the dismal present. It began with the failure of the mutiny in 1857 after which the conservative feudal elites and the radical peasantry, after a brief miraculous marriage, went their separate ways. The chasm between them continued to widen and may explain why the Congress, decades later, was utterly unable to capitalize on the significant gains achieved by Swami Sahajanand, and effectively channelize the deep unrest and dissatisfaction that he had tapped. It also explains why Jayaprakash Narayan's movement, despite an authentic mass base, amounted to so little in the end; why it was appropriated by the then emerging and now repugnant *nouveau riche* classes, the new elites, whose most prominent representative is Laloo Prasad Yadav.

Recent developments, even if superficially discouraging, attest to the unique dynamism of Bihar. The Lok Sabha results indicate a growing consolidation of upper class votes in favour of *hindutva*. But then it must not be forgotten that it was in Bihar that the first total transfer of power from the old elite to the new took place. The fact that a Laloo Prasad Yadav spearheads this new elite should not cause undue despair or pessimism. We cannot snobbishly dismiss Laloo Prasad Yadav in the manner of the metropolitan elites, who unfortunately at the same time also accept his haircut

and buffaloes as authentic proof of his membership of Bihar's great unwashed masses.

Too often the high turnover of colourful events and personalities in bourgeois politics obscure deeper and more important socio-political changes. The most significant fact about Bihar today is not the much-noted dominance of Laloo but the organized existence of a social force that holds out immense possibilities for the future. This is the landless peasantry, the Chamars and Musahars of central and north Bihar, who though constituting only 14 per cent of the population, add up to considerable strength when organized by the Kisan Sabha. Indeed, they already have experienced a political regeneration of sorts. It would be interesting to see what role they play in the coming years.

Interesting, too, would be the collision between the forces of liberalization and the custodians of Bihar's notorious socio-political ethos. Will the two settle for a marriage of convenience? Who will be the beneficiaries of the newly generated wealth? Will the hierarchies of caste and class be more flexible? Certainly, these are more useful questions than whether Laloo Prasad Yadav is going to make a bid for the Prime-ministership of India.

PANKAJ MISHRA

# Who is a Bihari?

MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE

THE self-image of a Bihari is more severely under siege today than it used to be in our youth. This change may be related to an increasing mobility in recent decades resulting from a real or imagined breakdown of the education process in the state and a lack of job opportunities. For those of us who grew up at home and went to school and college in Patna, there was no yardstick to evaluate ourselves except the homegrown one. Joseph Heller in one of his novels, I think in *Good as Gold*, said something about his Jewish hero that applied to us as well. This character did

not know he was a Jew until he grew up, got out of Long Island and met non-Jewish people. Till then he thought the whole world was Jewish.

In those days, since very few young people went outside the state to study, they did not have to be defensive about their identity. The handful that did venture out went only as far as Allahabad, Benaras or Calcutta. The returnees were rumoured to have become snooty, but they were too few in number to undermine our self-esteem. Delhi as a seat of learning was then unheard of, but within a generation



or two the entire map of aspiration has changed. Every educated family in Bihar now hopes to get the children educated in Delhi – the affluent sending them at school level, the middle class attempting to get their offspring admitted to a college in Delhi. Another wave washes up at the post-graduate level in all the three universities located in the capital, as much for the supposed superiority of the education imparted in these places and the relatively smooth running of their examination machinery as for the belief that Delhi offers a shorter route to success in the UPSC lottery, the ultimate pinnacle of ambition in underdeveloped states. In fact, the Delhi college system is now so closely dependent on the annual exodus from Bihar that last year, when the Bihar Secondary School Board suddenly became vigilant about its standards and drastically reduced the number of students who pass their exam, admission to certain colleges in Delhi, specially the ones outside the campus, is said to have plummeted, noticeably in History and Political Science, popular subjects among the sarkari job seekers. Many of those who miss out entering the university system in Delhi come for training in computers and other empirical skills and thousands get absorbed every year in the expanding job market of greater Delhi.

**T**he self-image of all those who move away from the home state is thereafter constantly conditioned by other people's fairly negative perception of what a Bihari is supposed to be. A whole range of reactions are possible to this situation – one extreme being a withdrawal into a Bihari ghetto within the capital, the other a disassociation from Bihari culture altogether.

What is this so-called Bihari culture anyway? It is no longer necessary to point out the heterogeneity of Bihar to outsiders. The Jharkhand movement is one indicator of the disparity between the interests of north and south Bihar, but even within these zones, dialect, accent, food, rituals and other identity markers are richly diverse. Those living on the southern bank of the Ganga, the relatively

urbanised part of the state, revel in jokes about the naivete of those who live across the river, just as the cycle of comic stories about the residents of a place called Baro rival the better known tales from U.P. told about the people of Balia, Chandrashekhar notwithstanding.

**T**he town of Purnea alone, which has produced two major Indian novelists, one in Hindi and one in Bangla (Phanishwar Nath Renu and Satinath Bhaduri) offers interesting illustrations of the gaps as well as the overlaps in the cultural configuration. Renu's Hindi novel *Maila Anchal* has a Bengali protagonist, but being an orphan he is outside the caste/community pigeon holes that divide the people of the village. In Bhaduri's novel *Jagori*, Nilu and Bilu, two sons of a Gandhian father are pulled into opposing political ideologies, but both have a soft corner for their childhood playmate Saraswati, a Bihari girl. Their mother who loves Saraswati like a daughter, nevertheless draws the line at marriage because she suddenly remembers that they are Bengalis and Saraswati is not. 'Can you stick the bark of one tree on another and expect it to stay? While we say Sarosoti, they would say Sarsoati!' There has always been in Bihar, like in most plural societies, free interaction as well as prejudices between communities, symbiosis along with a rhetoric of difference. But I cannot think of any other state in India that has made major literary contributions in three languages – Hindi, Bangla and Urdu.

Bihar may be broadly included in the 'Hindi belt'. Hindi is certainly the language in which the school textbooks are written – but Bhojpuri, Magahi and Maithili are the major vehicles of speech in the north, with Urdu and Bangla also claiming clear audibility, not to mention the many varieties of Austro-Asiatic language family heard in the Chhotanagpur region. But language does not necessarily divide the people in neat compartments, nor does religion, not even caste, that notoriously dominant factor in the social and political dynamics of the state. All boundaries are porous, and it is the leakages that provide the colour, the

complexity and uniqueness to each individual's experience of being a Bihari. At a personal level, growing up in the lanes of Sabzibag in the forties and the fifties as I did, meant being exposed to a layered way of life. For us inside the house it was the traditional Bengali joint family ethos, in many ways unchanged despite more than a hundred years' stay in Bihar. Except adopting the 'non-Bengali' custom of celebrating Diwali through the worship of Lakshmi rather than Kali, and occasionally using *sattu* to add variety to our cuisine, we did little that our relatives in Bengal would have found unfamiliar. The neighbourhood outside our home was predominantly Muslim, the elegance of whose leisured life-style in the walled mansions behind our house – distinctly sealed off in male and female arenas – was in direct contrast to the bustle on the streets.

**O**ur mohalla was in those days the central fruit market of the city, a distinction that has not quite been lost yet. But its other, and to me the more fascinating feature were the stalls of the *rangrez* with vats for mixing colour, where *dupattas* were dyed in tempting shades, sometimes in diagonal stripes and shined with mica dust. They also did block printing in gold and silver designs, on *mulmuls* fringed with zari borders, sprinkled with sequin dots for weddings and festive occasions. We looked forward greedily to the Muslim festival of *Bakr-id* when covered dishes came from Khalil chacha's house to ours, with meat that would melt in the mouth. The men in these neighbouring houses mixed socially; the children played together until it was time for the girls to start wearing *burqa*; but due to a curious practice of selective segregation, the women from the Hindu and Muslim families never visited each other.

In the peripheries of our lives existed a solid Marwari world, in some way connected with the Birla Mandir which served as a landmark to our locality. The loud clanging of cymbals and bells of *aarati* from the mandir every morning and evening punctuated our day as did the five *aazan* calls from the mosque, delivered through a microphone.

Most of the retail and wholesale cloth merchants in the nearby markets came from Rajasthan and they must have been settled in Patna long before the Lakshminarayan temple came into being. Their lives were separate from ours, but from our terrace we saw their yellow and red *bandhni*-saries fluttering in the wind (our aunts and mothers wore sober-hued handlooms) and massive amounts of pickle being sunned which we eyed with lust. The rooftop network of kite-flying, however, ignored all differences among the Muslim, the Bengali and the Marwari.

**P**ermeating all this was the Bihari ambiance of our lives, amorphous and difficult to define except in common pursuits like going to the Somwari mela during the rainy season to buy rag dolls, tiny wooden furniture for them and other cheap toys, or consuming with gusto the crisp *thehuas* and *khajurs* during *Chhat*. A certain way of speaking would unite us – nouns would be frequently suffixed with ‘tho’, Taranath would invariably become Taroa, and Madan would always be referred to as Madanawa until he grew up and became respectable.

At school too this pattern was replicated. In Bankipore Girls’ High, each class had three sections divided according to the medium of instruction – Hindi, Bangla and Urdu. But in the school compound the sections got mixed up in a joint passion for tamarind from the huge tree that stood in front of the building or a turn at the solitary swing, something so highly desired that we often broke our glass bangles to grab it. We never spoke English, except when compelled by the teacher to answer questions in the English class. We played *kho kho* and *kabaddi*, quarreled and did *kutti*, all in Hindi with a deep Patna Bihari cadence (no one spoke any dialect in school). Perchance, if any newcomer to the school came from another state, whose accent was different from ours, who dared to say *main* for the first person singular instead of *hum*, we mocked her for meowing like a cat until she learnt to conform.

Yet, one of the first things that Biharis like to do when they leave the state

is to get rid of this tell-tale inflection in their speech, although a trace of it tends to linger on, treacherously betraying our roots, whether we are speaking Hindi or English. Unlike people from certain coastal states, who eagerly flaunt their regional identities, the sophisticated Bihari prefers to be evasive about his place of origin.

This I learnt from my encounter with a microbiologist some years ago. Like me, he too had just joined the newly established Central University in Hyderabad. When we met at breakfast in the Guest House, despite his clipped and pucca English accent, I had a vague sense of fellow-feeling. ‘Where are you from?’, I asked him hopefully. ‘From Concordia University, Montreal,’ he said. ‘Before that?’ He grudgingly told me that he had done his M.Sc from BHU. ‘But where is your home?’ My curiosity was getting the better of me. ‘A little to the east of Benaras,’ was all that he was willing to concede. Further shameless probing finally revealed that he was from Barh, only thirty miles from where I grew up. So it was not surprising that I should have been able to sniff him out. He was not pleased. It is a curious kind of snobbery that would make a man take on the air of an Uttar Pradesh in preference to being a Bihari.

**T**he salesgirl in Amrapali, the Bihar State Emporium in Delhi was no better. She was visibly annoyed that I assumed she must belong to the same state as I do. ‘Do I look like a Bihari?’ she said, quick to take offence. She need not have worried. Bihari girls no longer look any different from others after globalisation has hit us. In my frequent visits to Patna, at least twice a year, I see new boutiques, shopping complexes and beauty parlours spring up each time. The rag dolls have vanished, making place for Barbie dolls. The new Ganga Bridge has brought north Bihar closer to Patna, making the streets more crowded. But the one great bonus is that it is now possible to drive across to Hajipur for a Sunday breakfast of *jalebi* and *kachori*. Despite the invasion of fast food culture, the quality of those, thankfully, still remain unbeatable.

# Shadows of the poltergeists

ARUN SINHA

THE images Bihar evokes – deification of violence, shelterless poverty, the innate *gaucherie* of the middle class – constitute a fearful throng of ghosts implacably invading the world of Biharis living away from their land. They feel helpless before these ghosts because no matter how many they kill, other spectres arise to fill the space, popping out of the morning paper and dancing on the evening's coloured screens.

Like wounded lions – wounded as men, furious as lions – Biharis outside their fatherland hit out, first at journalists then at the other races of India. 'They are the mothers and fathers of myths – the reporters and photographers who go to Bihar only to find such images and do not hesitate to invent them if they can't find them.' This near-hysterical cry came from Bihari hearts everywhere when a satellite TV channel showed three men, masked to the nose like Kashmiri militants, each holding a cold gun in their hands for display. 'This can't be Bihar!' shrieked the Biharis. They knew their Bihar too well to be scandalized by boys in Kashmiri terrorists' outfits. 'We don't

plead nobody in Bihar has a gun,' they said. 'But to have people dressed up in terrorist costumes can only be the work of a bunch of cynical and ignorant Indians who cannot tell Kashmir from Bihar.'

A considerable number of non-resident Biharis, instead of brandishing scimitars at the demons of dark Bihariography, follow their own pacific, vasectomized consciences. Their Bihari-ness shames them instead of making them proud. So they practice what is best for a peaceful coexistence: a deep, cultivated amnesia. No ethnic Bihari babble of the sort 'We gave the republic its first president', or 'Gandhiji started his satyagraha in Champaran', stirs the hearts of these silenced Biharis. If the din of the babble persists, the pacifics might turn round and tell the ethnics to stop. 'Don't talk of the past. Talk of the present. Name the worst of things and it starts there.'

These are the traitors. Posing as Indians, even cosmopolitans, they join the crowd weaving imaginative stories about Bihar (they excel at this for there are no real pictures since they ceased

visiting their wombtombs). Sadly, they are accepted in the rest of the world as innocent, even cultured Bihari babus. But although they themselves probably have, the world does not forget their Bihari roots. By way of unspoken prejudices or taunts unleashed in the middle of a party, the ghosts of Bihariness often grip them, triggering off old shameful dreams. This kind of hidden Bihari sometimes turns more ethnic than the ethnics in the company of other Biharis, defending his fatherland with rare passion. But the rest of his ilk, alas, kill their dreams the next morning.

The general picture of the non-resident Biharis, therefore, is a broken one, with the dominant part turning its back to Bihar. They may be among the world's rarest races denying their roots, hence antithetical to the current of ethnicity overtaking the planet. The Biharis who migrated to other provinces of India in the years before Independence were not such perfect murderers of their genesis. Whether a rickshaw-wallah in Calcutta or a London-returned barrister practising in Allahabad, the Bihari belonged to Bihar and carried his Bihariness without much dilution in his character. Though the old wisdom of *Jaisa des vaissā bhes* (In Rome do as the Romans) forced them into adopting the fashion of the town, this did not imply a cohesion with the local cultures, nor a subjugation to spiritual or cultural assaults and incursions.

In the minds of other Indians whatever is conjured up as Bihari – a noun which is also adjective – is primarily made of the fossils of the early Bihar migrant-types. I have met people from other states who described certain faces as Bihari by merely looking at their cheekbones, forehead and chin (not to mention the darker-side-of-the-brown skin) only to realise later that they were misled by a heavy-duty moustache. For those whom I do not know and who may read this, I have some advice to offer: judge not a Bihari by his moustache. Shatrughna Sinha has only surrealism over his lips and Shekhar Suman doesn't have even that.

Unlike Bengalis or Punjabis who, despite universal awareness of their holowness or stink, can sail through gatherings or streets with ethnic pride, Biharis become stunted by their stereotypes. They do not form a community like the Keralites do in strange lands, because they believe they have nothing of worth to defend. A community forms to defend its ethos, social rank, knowledge, arts, uniqueness. What is the ethos of Bihar? Where do we find cultural richness in this state? Is there a form of art we can call Bihari? What are our distinctive features, after all? Did enlightenment come to us? This realistic self-appraisal in a world of competing ethnicities can be damaging for a Bihari. He has no folk theatre or dances; no martial arts were born in this reddened land; nor did any Nizam or Maharaja emerge in this rock fort of feudalism. No football frenzy, no great literature, no Shilpaddikaram, no architectural styles, no delectable cuisine, no distinctive dress. Not even (minus everything) Lucknowi snobbery.

A Bihari dreads to go to all-state fairs. The damndest, he knows, will be the pavilion from Bihar. Only the men and women behind the counter are likely to be from Bihar: the 'things', you can tell, are from India. At best, the maiden's costumes and brave boy's archery will be from Chotanagpur, which is not Bihar. By way of cuisine you may be offered a stuffed round bulb called *litti* which is the poor man's diet in Bhojpur and upon which gentlemen fall back only for fun. If you stay long enough in the Bihar pavilion, you may have to step back to look at the banner again, just to check if it wasn't an extension of some other state's pavilion. But you will know you were in Bihar when you leave, because there will be no one who will join his or her palms in an *namaste*. Merely by observing the etiquette you will stumble upon the truth.

Be Indian, think Indian. This becomes the lifelong recital of most non-resident Biharis. This is a strange dialectic working in favour of Mother India: the more condemned the Bihari is,

the more Indian he becomes. Bihar's loss is the country's gain. At least one race is willing to call itself Indian! It is a sad, but inevitable epilogue to the unity and diversity fable. What else did you expect when Indians ask everybody to be Indians?

Once such nationalisation takes over, richness returns to the physical and spiritual life of Biharis, since they have hundreds of glorious reservoirs to draw from. The Goan fisherwomen's dekhni, Kerala's Mohiniattam, Karnataka's Yakshagana, Bengal's Jatra and Maharashtra's Tamasha, the Vijayanagara empire, Tulsidas' Ramcharit Manas, the Bhagvada Gita, Krishna's love lore, Gandhi and Satyajit Ray, C. V. Raman and Jagdish Chandra Bose, Sufi saints and Bhakti poets – in short, all that goes with other peoples' ethnic pride now goes with the Bihari's egotistical arrogance. Even after the others erect barriers against him, the Bihari transcends his particularism and doesn't hesitate to dip his hand into other people's inherited baggage.

The ghoulish spirits of Bihar seem to have achieved, however unwittingly, what big industry and the cities after defying Marxist determinism could not; what Independent India, defying the nationalist cohesion dream, was unable to do either. In just a few decades and in scattered cities, they have created a large number of Indians destined to head the national mainstream. They will be the leaders, the rest will follow. The bitter irony of the burial of an entire past may of course remain, but there will also be a positive side which will exclude factors of particularist oddities when other Indians interact with Biharis. The Bihari will not stop at taking pride in his heritage alone, but will gladly appropriate every other people's heritage as well.

This is what is happening and will continue to happen to Biharis at the conscious level. Those who agree with me should not, however, fail to notice the powerful forces of patriotism that never cease to work at the unconscious level within the Bihari mind. The big, bad, condemning world has to concede that Bihar was not in the past what it is today.



The place has an unmatched glorious past. 'We were the founders of India,' Bihari intelligentsia had cried, fighting for a separate province of Bihar at the turn of the century. And how could the British viceroyalty – or their Bengali lackeys – deny a self-governing province to the race that had once governed practically the whole of India?

The wheel at the heart of the Indian flag, the four roaring lions in the Indian seal, the wisdom in our art of government and in our profound philosophies – who but Bihar gifted this priceless inheritance to an unwise and divided nation? Asoka was the greatest of the great, the beginning and consummation of Indian history – the seed, the harvest and the harvester. Would there even *be* an India but for him?

There has to be a hidden ethnic mythology even in the cosmopolitan mind. It is there in the Bihari mind and Asoka, not Buddha or Mahavir, lies at its core. A pragmatic logic works behind this attitude. The life and times of this great Mauryan emperor alternate from a epitome of political glory to the pinnacle of spiritual piety. In Asoka's variegated image, the Bihari has discovered a double breastplate for his armour: the first plate is soft and full of Buddhist righteousness; the second is domineering and full of Asokan imperialism.

**T**his is where Biharis score over other Indians. Unlike other ethnic groups, Biharis do not need to invent their ancient past. Their ethnic profile stands on its own, unaided by myths. The Mauryan past is proven history and each revelation only adds to its enrichment and fulfilment. The facts are so overwhelming that there is no room for the magical or supernatural in the Bihari's race-view. So strong is their heritage that Biharis vanquish their present merely by borrowing a little from their past. Historicity is the armature in the motor of the Bihari personality. Thus does he avoid dropping off into a void. In spite of this, however, Indian society is not receptive to him: a Bihari is still best avoided and in this age of inter-ethnic marriages, Biharis still marry other Biharis.

There is, however, a sad undertone to this appeal to history. There is no visible connection between a Bihari's ancient history and his contemporary pride. The Bengalis have Tagore, the Boses, Ray and Amartya Sen; they have Badal Sircar; they have theatre groups in every village, music and arts. And since they have all the music and all the noise, Bengalis are heard with expressions of polite awe when they talk of their past. They are respected and given an equal place (though they would have none but the highest in their race-view of themselves) in the Indian hall of historical fame. Biharis are denied similar recognition because they do not have any Rays or Vivekanands, any remarkable painters or musicians, any recent theorists or practitioners who have blazed new trails.

**I**n short, there are no visible, recognisable modern symbols of Bihari pride; no continuity with their glorious past. And as if the wretchednesses heaped upon them was insufficient, centuries of cultural eclipse threaten to snatch away their only great heritage: the Mauryan past. Much as this sounds like black humour, other Indian races, on discovering that Biharis cannot establish their links with their ancient past, have run away with the Bihari pot of gold. If Mauryan glory is the sheet-anchor of Bihariness, it has now been confiscated by other Indians, leaving the Bihari with no native inheritance. The tables have been turned on the Bihari argument that India was made by the Mauryas. If the Mauryas were Indians, they belong to all Indians, say the other races, not privately to Biharis!

So at the end of the journey, the Bihari is once again alone, just an individual – an Indian without pride who in the absence of any example of excellence in recent history, has to strive to demonstrate his individual excellence to gain acceptance. Every Bihari outside his land so devotes himself to himself that he has no time for any emotional ethnicity. Ethnicity does nothing for his self-esteem. Ultimately, only a clean break with Bihar gets him the happiness he seeks.

# Para-banking and para-politics

ARVIND N DAS

THE ways in which the metropolitan unintelligentsia reacts to Bihar is distinctly odd. It exhibits greater ignorance about Bihar than about Bosnia and relates to developments in the state as if they happened in some strange never-never land. Stereotyping has been substituted for information and caricature has replaced understanding. It is no surprise, therefore, that Bihar mystifies economic analysts and political commentators alike.

There is considerable amazement, for instance, at the results of the parliamentary elections. While the votaries of hindutva are overjoyed at what they perceive to be an endorsement of their politics, self-styled secularists fail to understand why their hero Laloo Prasad Yadav has not been able to keep his fortress unbreached.

Indeed, Laloo Prasad is a figure who causes immense confusion among the chattering classes. At first, they made fun of him as a country bumpkin, as the village idiot of Indian politics. When those who knew better pointed to his cunning, they were derided as having been taken in by the ideology of Mandalisation. Later, he was portrayed as an intrepid anti-communist and a master of the art of *realpolitik*. Again, when those who knew better pointed out that he had no clue about the nitty-gritty of steering the ship of state, they were dismissed as carping critics

who refused to acknowledge the mastery of the great communicator. The metropolitan media has never been able to make a realistic assessment of Laloo Prasad Yadav and, no wonder, it portrays him either as a clown or as a hero. It is wrong on both counts.

The analysis of Laloo Prasad Yadav's state has been similarly uninformed. Bihar has been so obscured by the clichés of poverty, backwardness and degeneration that its significant developments have been ignored. Even features that should have been apparent to the naked eye have gone unnoticed. The fact is that Bihar has changed and the elements of its economic transformation have now started impacting on its politics. The gains of the BJP-Samata combine and the losses suffered by Laloo Prasad Yadav's Janata Dal need to be analysed in this context.

The Other Backward Class (OBC) vote bloc has split and this fragmentation explains more about the electoral results than the appeal of ideology, whether hindutva or Mandal. The Kurmis endorsed the BJP-Samata combine not because they developed a sudden love for Ram, but because many of them are upwardly mobile, wannabe upper castes who feel uncomfortable with Laloo Prasad's cultivation of poverty. It is estimated that Bihar today has more doctors and engineers from among the

Kurmis than any other caste. They are also among the relatively better-off professionals, more vulnerable in a raj where kidnapping for ransom is a major industry. Therefore, the urge for law and order among Kurmis and the rejection of Lalooed lawlessness is understandable.

Another feature of Bihar is that while the poor have remained where they were, or at best, become marginally less poor, the rich have become immensely richer. The mushrooming multi-storeyed buildings in Patna symbolise the increasing affluence of this section while the flourishing boutiques (Patna even has a Pierre Cardin outlet) in its shopping complexes testify to its conspicuous consumption.

**T**he apparent paradox is that this affluence is exhibiting itself in a situation of no ostensible growth. The stagnation of Bihar has become such a commonplace cliché that it is indeed difficult to note accumulation and explain its sources. And yet there are startling facts. The money market is booming in Bihar. Millions are put into the banking sector and even larger amounts are garnered by institutions which claim to be engaged in 'para-banking'. Sahara and JVG, Helios and Cyrus (of the self-proclaimed 'Wizard Group') are omnipresent in Bihar, far more powerful than Peerless ever was in West Bengal. These 'non-banking financial institutions' mobilise huge deposits in small amounts from an enormous number of people, promising handsome returns on investments. The rates of interest offered often exceed 24 per cent per annum and, therefore, these cash-rich companies have to lend money at even higher rates of interest.

This phenomenon has not been sufficiently analysed but it may well hold the key to much of what is happening in Bihar and similar regions of the country. According to official statistics, Bihar has a growth rate of more than 3 per cent in the agricultural sector. This is among the highest in the country, all the more remarkable because it has been sustained despite practically no public investment in rural infrastructure or promotion of

the green revolution strategy. In fact, the statistics are flawed and as agriculture is an untaxed economic activity, even worse monitored than other sectors, the actual growth rate could be higher.

Add to this the wealth created by the substantial but largely unaccounted remittances which flow into Bihar. The remittances flow not only from the hundreds of thousands of Bihari workers who toil outside the state but, increasingly, also from the non-resident Indians (NRIs) who a couple of decades ago migrated in substantial numbers. The latter had practically cut themselves off from their native state, finding the grass greener on the other side of the green card. Now, as their daughters reach marriageable age, they recall their roots and send back money to re-establish their presence in places from where they had fled. The construction boom in small towns and villages is evidence of this flow of remittances.

**I**n all, there is a fair amount of money in Bihar and it desperately seeks investment opportunities. The problem is that much of this money is outside the tax net and its owners cannot risk inclusion in the tax system. The provision that banks must deduct tax at source on interest earnings above Rs 10,000, therefore, propels this money towards 'para-banking'. In turn, these institutions acquire enormous liquidity at a time when the regular financial sector is beset with a debilitating cash crunch—a phenomenon that enables them to lend out money at interest rates of 36 per cent or more. Such usury also gives them tremendous political clout, since they can be used to disguise large deposits by corrupt politicians and bureaucrats by showing them as having come from numerous small depositors. Such *benami* money gives a new dimension to the political economy of *beimani*.

It is estimated that only one branch office of one such 'para-banking' company raises around one billion rupees every month. No wonder that they have sufficient financial muscle to sponsor election results and may soon start sponsoring elections themselves. Indeed, the arrest in Lucknow of a large number

of employees of the Sahara 'para-banking' company sent there from Patna to cast bogus votes in favour of Raj Babbar, is only the tip of this dangerous political-financial iceberg.

This 'modernised' usury fits in well with the overall nature of the political economy of Bihar. It enables the upper caste landlords to diversify their operations, aids accumulation among the emergent kulaks, and effortlessly replaces sustained growth and redistribution with speculation. It also assists political 'Sanskritisation': witness the success of the BJP-Samata combine.

On the other side, Laloo Prasad Yadav has made a political virtue of stagnation. His rhetoric of anti-developmentalism only amuses the observers from the big cities and manages to raise some rural laughs when he proclaims that power can be dangerous for the poor since their cattle may get electrocuted. The combination of such speculator finance capital and political cretinism traps Bihar into a vicious cycle. It does not attract productive industrial investment. The excuse is poor infrastructural facilities. Curiously, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) computed the infrastructure index of Bihar at 96 against an all-India index of 100. While states like Karnataka with an infrastructure index of 84, Tamil Nadu with 80 and even Kerala with 69 leap ahead towards modernity, Bihar is caught in the precarious syndrome of 'para-politics' as epitomised by both the Janata Dal and the BJP-Samata combine.

**T**he problem is that in Bihar, which has yet to see the coming of age of a modern civil society, riches are still a reflection of a pre-modern society. The state, too, exists more as an instrument of coercion rather than as an expression of the general will of its people. An interesting and literally illuminating example of this is the 'privatization' of public utilities. In places like Darbhanga, where a considerable population of highly educated physicians requires electricity to practise its craft, it is not the State Electricity Board or large-scale, organised sector power companies

that supply power. Instead, power is generated and distributed by small-scale, *mohalla*-level operators who run diesel generators and charge fixed rates from consumers.

**T**his phenomenon would gladden the hearts of the most avid de-centralisers as well as the most rabid Thatcherite privatisers. However, it has little to do with either the philosophy of local-level autonomous economic organisation or with the ideology of intrepid entrepreneurship. Rather, it is merely a manifestation of private and, in fact, feudal appropriation of modern technology and the blessings of scientific development. It is not that this supply of power follows the logic of the market place which, cruel and inhuman as it is, recognises no nexus other than the cash one. Instead, it works on the basis of brute muscle power, relationships based on patronage and clientilism, and pre-capitalist appropriation of what should lie in the realm of the public.

Bihar thus represents the truth in the prognosis of Karl Marx that human history is not unilinear, with a pre-determined path of progress which leads inevitably towards modernity and post-modernity. Marx held that human beings always have the choice to either move towards humanistic equity – which he called socialism – or to adopt barbarity as their destiny. Even the fact of technological change makes no difference to the existence of this choice, for technology itself can be adapted to either situation. Bihar appears to have chosen technological barbarity as its model and ‘Harries’ – as Biharis are called by the yuppie-puppie set in Delhi and elsewhere – have done little to demonstrate their disapproval.

For all their mobility into modernity, Harries – the educated, highly intelligent, civilisationally blessed offspring of the land which has seen continuous and ever-developing culture for more than two-and-a-half millennia – show no evidence of their anguish at the state of affairs, far less an urge to change the situation. Like Pontius Pilate, and following the non-resident Indian’s example, the

Harries too have decided either to opt out or to accept the status quo. The result is an appalling abdication of their public role, rendering them irrelevant, not only in their home state but also in the general polity of India and the globalised world.

This is the phenomenon that explains the perceptible swing in middle class, urban Bihar towards the BJP and the swing of middle class heroes like Nitish Kumar and George Fernandes towards *hindutva*. As Laloo Prasad Yadav falls between the two stools of ‘multinational modernity’ and ‘primordial casteism’, the middle class sniggers louder. The fact that the BJP only provides an alternative of deeply dividing society or even dragging it further backwards, is for the moment being ignored. It is precisely this kind of obsession with the obtaining system that limits the choice of the Harries to the Tweedledum of Laloo Prasad Yadav and the Tweedledee of Shatrughna Sinha. They fail to see the need to break intellectual and political boundaries, to shatter the given and to attempt something new and exciting.

**H**ence, even as the tired old CPM leaders of West Bengal strive to ‘tigerise’ the state through striking concordances with old and new colonialists, the Harries remain content to let their state become a goat in the cruel game of globalization. The tragedy is that this lack of initiative condemns not only their state but even themselves, since they will remain merely the butt end of jokes. History will not let them forget their destiny and economics will not let them get over their present pathos.

And yet, time keeps giving the Harries repeated opportunities to redeem themselves, of proving that not only are they the inheritors of a proud tradition going back to Mauryan times but that they are also placed by a quirk of geography over resources that can make or mar the post-industrial society. The next elections may provide them one more opportunity of fashioning an exciting agenda for Bihar. It is to be seen if the Harries will seize the moment to devise an imaginative ‘Harriat Conference’ with a bold and innovative plan for themselves and their state.



# The enigma that is Bihar economy

SHAIBAL GUPTA

IN the absence of subnationalism<sup>1</sup> and its concomitant economic entrepreneurship,<sup>2</sup> the class which assumed power in Bihar after Independence did not have a synthetic vision for the agricultural or industrial growth of the state. Their narrow vision of economic development could not transcend zamindari abolition (giving up the system of intermediaries) and a few prestigious large projects in the public sector. Measures for land reform were not undertaken seriously.

The national government's policy of freight equalisation institutionalised the domination of western Indian capital to the detriment of eastern India in the Indian economy. This significantly marginalised the natural advantage Bihar enjoyed in the realm of mineral resources. Large private investment, which started off with the Tatas in the early part of the 20th century, did not substantially increase after Independence. Bihar's economic stagnation, if not decline, remains unchanged even after six years of Laloo Prasad's efforts to change the situation. This is clearly revealed by the fact that of the 40 districts which attracted investment above Rs 40 billion, no district from Bihar other than East Singhbhum (the citadel of Tata industries) figures in the list.

Economic development involves structural transformation and a composite long term vision. In India, and specially Bihar, this involves a transition from feudalism to capitalism. Unfortunately, the class which guided the destiny of Bihar since Independence was hostile to such a strategy because it threatened its entrenched feudal legacy. The present regime, although it has no direct links with feudalism, is innocent about the development needs and intricacies involved in the new market-friendly economic dispensation. The establishment of a few heavy

industries in the midst of an essentially feudal agricultural economy with practically no economic interdependence, has not altered the basic structure of the Bihar economy in any significant manner.

*Status of industry in Bihar:* Since Independence, industry in Bihar has grown at a rate lower than the national rate. Disturbing as this is, what is more disturbing is that while national industrial growth shows some tendency towards acceleration, there is a clear tendency towards deceleration in Bihar. The average national industrial growth rate as a whole increased from about 5% in the '60s to about 8% in the '80s. During the '60s, Bihar's industrial growth rate was roughly the same as the national growth rate. Since then, it has decelerated from about 5% to about 4% in the '80s. During the '90s, the position may have worsened. Interestingly, the relatively large industries in Bihar had grown almost at par with the national growth rate even during the '80s.

The Annual Survey of Industries shows that during the '80s, Bihar's share in the national aggregate fell from 4.4% to 3.4% in terms of number of factories but its share of employment remained constant at 5% and share of output rose from 5.1 to 5.3%. Again, in the early '80s, labour productivity in India was about 2.4 times that in Bihar; by the end of the decade the figure came down to 1.5. Thus the deceleration in the growth rate of industries in Bihar is primarily due to the slower growth rate of the small industrial units in the state. The fact that the large industries in Bihar grow at a higher rate than the small industries means that the sustaining power of these two sub-sectors (large and small) is different. It is reasonable to conclude that the large industries in Bihar are a part of the national industrial growth process, whereas the

small industries suffer because they are dependent on the slowly growing local economy.

This absence of interdependence between large industries in Bihar and the local economy can also be inferred from the composition of the state's industrial output (Table 1). More than 60% of its total industrial output is concentrated in two sectors – basic metals and transport equipment – which operate in the national and international market. Many other industries for which inputs are available locally or whose output would find a home market (like food, jute, wood or metal products) exist only marginally.

**C**urrent investment patterns indicate that future industrialisation in Bihar may be still slower. The per capita annual investment is only Rs 2200 (Table 2), the lowest in India and less than one-fourth of the national average of Rs 9200. The earlier trend of public sector investment as the larger component of total investment continues. Currently, only one-fourth of the total investment in Bihar is from the private sector, one of the lowest in India. Thus, Bihar receives barely 1.2% of total private investment in India and 2.5% of total investment in India, public and private put together. If we remember that Bihar accounts for about 10% of India's population, these figures indicate a further deceleration of industries in Bihar. Even if we take the current level

of industrial output in Bihar, which is about 5% of the national industrial output, the current investment level is quite alarming.

Another important aspect of such a structural profile relates to the kinds of industrial products a region produces and the degree to which different product-based sectors are integrated among themselves. Even a limited familiarity with the product structure of industries in Bihar would reveal that a large part of its industry is engaged in primary processing of mining output, like transforming iron-ore into steel, mica into finished mica or producing basic chemicals. The later stage of production which involves transformation of these semi-finished products into finished products for consumption is conspicuously absent in the state. Thus most of the industries are merely an extension of its mining sector, unable to effect a vertical integration of the industries at the regional level. The absence of such an integration makes the industrial sector insensitive to

TABLE 2

Regional Investment Pattern in India, 1993-94					
Major States	Per capita investment (Rs. '000)	Share of state investment (%)	Distribution of pvt. sector investment (%)	Aggregate investment Amount (Rs '000 crores)	Percentage Distribution
Andhra Pradesh	8.7	73.6	10.8	58.0	7.5
Assam	6.5	12.0	0.4	14.6	1.9
Bihar	2.2	24.1	1.2	19.8	2.5
Gujarat	22.6	57.2	13.5	93.4	12.0
Haryana	10.4	30.3	1.3	17.2	2.2
Himachal Pradesh	46.6	32.4	2.0	24.1	3.1
Karnataka	10.5	66.1	7.9	47.2	6.1
Kerala	5.2	30.1	1.1	15.0	9.1
Madhya Pradesh	12.4	56.9	12.2	85.0	10.9
Maharashtra	12.8	57.9	14.3	97.8	12.6
Orissa	25.9	63.9	13.2	81.9	10.6
Punjab	9.1	23.1	1.1	18.5	2.4
Rajasthan	4.3	39.6	1.9	18.7	2.4
Tamil Nadu	7.8	40.8	4.5	43.8	5.6
Uttar Pradesh	4.1	42.8	6.2	57.3	7.4
West Bengal	4.4	51.4	3.9	29.8	3.8
All India	9.2	NA	100.0	722.1	100.0

Source: CMIE, Bombay.

increased production levels in other sectors of the state's economy. Thus an additional steel plant in Bihar will not make a substantial difference to the production levels of local mica or structural clay products. And the sectors which are likely to benefit from such an additional steel plant (say, metal products or non-electrical machinery) are not located in the state.

#### Constraints on industrial growth:

The most widely identified constraint on Bihar's industrial growth is the poor status of its industrial infrastructure. This observation is not devoid of an empirical basis. Yet, surprisingly, an index of industrial infrastructure computed by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), Bombay, shows Bihar's index to be 96, taking the national index as 100. Of the 15 major Indian states, at least six have an index lower than Bihar. The index for Madhya Pradesh is 97, around the same as Bihar's. As is well known, at least five of these states (Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu) have been able to attract far more investment than Bihar. Thus an inadequate infrastructure, although relevant, is obviously less critical than other constraints on industrial growth. However, it must be noted that Bihar's infrastructure is particularly weak where

TABLE 1

#### Composition of Industrial Output of Bihar, 1993-94

Industries	No. of factories			Value of output		
	Bihar	India	Bihar's share	Bihar	India	Bihar's Share
Food Products	24398	57269	42.60	410	32801	1.25
Beverage/Tobacco products	125	1644	7.60	144	4277	3.37
Textile	433	23702	1.83	34	24768	0.14
Wood & Wood products	2773	22234	12.47	16	824	1.94
Paper/Printing products	1720	9679	17.77	37	6270	0.59
Leather/Fur products	59	1568	3.76	60	2251	2.67
Rubber/Plastic products	651	7866	8.28	1914	22597	8.47
Chemical/Chemical products	1023	9675	10.57	393	29187	1.35
Non-metallic mineral products	1820	13460	13.52	431	7773	5.54
Basic metals & alloy products	738	8567	8.61	5008	28457	17.59
Metal products	2065	12855	16.06	41	4927	0.83
Elec. machinery products	2405	16870	14.26	268	14340	1.87
Transport equipment	53	3437	1.54	1176	13322	8.83
Other industries	39	2075	1.88	5	1987	-
Repair/Services	2641	7521	35.12	14	1805	-
All India	40943	198422	20.63	9951	195586	5.08

Source: CMIE, Bombay.

availability of power is concerned. Bihar's power deficit as a percentage of the total requirement is 35.4%, the highest in the country. Therefore, although the overall index for infrastructure is 96, its effectiveness is limited because power is a more critical infrastructural input than railways, roads or communication.

**T**he absence of a home market is probably the most crucial constraint on Bihar's industrial growth. To understand this, it is important to identify the possible economic linkages between an industrial centre and its agricultural periphery. Industry in Bihar needs a certain capital which traditional agriculture is unable to supply.

The share of agriculture in the State Domestic Product continues to be high (48.66%) in Bihar. Though the growth rate of foodgrain production is 2.33% (Table 3) higher than the national average, the per capita agricultural income of the rural population is only Rs 948, far below the national average of Rs 1522. Other than removing the intermediaries, no thorough land reform has been attempted. Even then, the average size of operational holding in Bihar is 0.87 ha., much below the national average 1.68 ha. In Punjab and Haryana, which have witnessed dramatic agricultural prosperity, the average size of the operational land holding is 2.75-3.76 ha. The technological improvement of agriculture is also low, as indicated by the per ha. consumption of fertilizer (57.2 kg) or number of diesel/energised pump-sets (211,000 and 258,000) or tractors (63,000).

Under such conditions, agricultural surplus is obviously limited. Industry also needs raw materials which cannot always be sourced to the adjoining areas unless it is an agro-based industry for which agro inputs are produced locally. And finally, we need to look at the supply of wage goods, of which foodgrains are the most important. Adjoining agricultural regions may certainly profit from this increased demand of their output, but presumably only a limited number of households with some marketable surplus are able to utilise this opportunity.

On the other hand, the flow of goods from industry to agriculture will be even more limited because the poor cultivators and agricultural labourers hardly constitute a local market for the output of the industrial sector. Therefore, the geographical proximity of the industrial centre and its agricultural periphery, unaccompanied by any substantial economic linkage through exchange of goods, only implies their coexistence without any substantial spread effect of industry on agriculture. This is similar to large parts of rural Maharashtra which derive only a limited benefit from the large but localised industrial belt of the state.

**A**nother important constraint on industrialisation in Bihar has been created by the New Economic Policy of 1991. This might sound paradoxical as the main thrust of the policy is on industrial growth. However, from the perspective of poor states like Bihar, the policy creates more constraints than opportunities. Since it envisages the market system as the principal driving force behind all economic activity, it is obvious that regions which currently have lower command over the market will lose to those who are stronger in this respect. The composition of current investment by different industries in Bihar is a strong

indicator of how the state is more likely to lose than gain from the new policy (Table 4). A comparison between the current composition of industrial output in Bihar (Table 1) and the destination of current investment (Table 5) shows that the two are different and Bihar is unlikely to attract much of this investment. It is for this reason that one has to think of a different industrial policy for Bihar from those of industrially advanced states.

**T**he industrial policy of the Government of Bihar announced in 1995, does not reflect this predilection. The most important component of an industrial policy for Bihar should have been structural reform in agriculture to create both an investable surplus and market for local industries. The strongest link one can visualise between an emerging industrial centre and adjoining agriculture is through the supply of foodgrains (from agriculture to the industrial workers) and a product market for the industries ensuring a reverse flow (from industry to agriculture). In an overall Indian context, the first part of the linkage was fully utilised to promote the green revolution. Under the present conditions, therefore, it is necessary to utilise the other linkage to promote a balanced growth of agriculture and industry – one where the former

TABLE 3

Salient Indicators About The Status of Agriculture in Different States of India, 1993-94							
Major States	Average size of operational holding (ha.)	Gross cropped area per person of rural pop (ha.)	Per capita foodgrains production (kg)	Growth of foodgrains production	Agriculture income created (Rs)	Agriculture income created per capita of rural pop (Rs)	Share of agriculture in SDP(%)
Andhra Pradesh	1.72	0.27	174	0.82	4549	1240	40.74
Assam	1.31	0.19	149	2.66	6998	1318	42.40
Bihar	0.87	0.14	121	2.33	6827	948	48.66
Gujarat	3.15	0.36	109	0.23	4361	1576	28.91
Haryana	2.75	0.46	575	4.43	6321	2878	44.93
Karnataka	2.41	0.39	166	1.73	4462	1740	36.36
Kerala	0.36	0.14	37	1.89	9517	1341	37.07
Madhya Pradesh	2.92	0.44	246	2.87	2983	1317	45.58
Maharashtra	2.65	0.45	144	1.60	3779	1695	23.03
Orissa	1.47	0.34	230	3.43	3718	1259	50.74
Punjab	3.76	0.52	957	4.11	7594	3929	47.09
Rajasthan	4.34	0.53	224	3.26	2448	1291	50.26
Tamil Nadu	1.01	0.19	142	3.13	5738	1064	23.49
Uttar Pradesh	0.93	0.23	252	3.53	5763	1310	42.98
West Bengal	0.92	0.17	177	5.93	7472	1264	35.47
All India	1.68	0.29	201	2.01	5234	1522	

Source: CMIE, Bombay.

provides a domestic market for the latter. This can be done if the state government takes steps to change both the institutional and technological base of agriculture.

Let us now examine infrastructure. The government should improve the overall budgetary position which would mean an augmentation of its resources and their optimal deployment for improving the state's industrial infrastructure. Tax structure and expenditure pattern are crucial to this perspective. The existing tax rates in Bihar are generally higher than those in the relatively advanced and neighbouring states. This has proved to be counter-productive. It is better to have competitive but more efficiently administered tax rates (not necessarily equal).

**A**s an immediate measure for improving infrastructure, utmost priority should be given to efficient utilisation of the existing infrastructure. Apart from promoting professionalism in their management, this will require a substantial maintenance expenditure for existing roads, power plants and the power distribution system. Unfortunately, expenditure on existing infrastructure is billed as

**TABLE 5**  
Aggregate Investment in Manufacturing Sector in India by Industries (Rs Crores), 1993-94

Industry	Investment (Rs Crores)	Percentage
Food products	7549	2.8
Textiles	7700	2.9
Paper/Printing	10357	3.9
Rubber/Plastic	3235	1.2
Chemical/Chem products	121590	45.9
Basic metal	59297	22.4
Non-metallic min. products	27043	10.2
Transport equipment	7526	2.8
Other industries	20756	7.8
Total	265053	100.0

Source: CMIE, Bombay.

non-plan in the state budgets and thus has a lower priority than plan expenditure on new infrastructure.

**Bihar in debt trap:** Both a short term programme for industrialisation through infrastructural development or a long term programme through developing local markets would require substantial public expenditure. It is here that one must analyse the resource position of the state government, particularly its debt position.

Table 6 shows the composition of Bihar's outstanding debt between 1992 and 1994. The total outstanding debt has grown at an average rate of 17% during

this period while the internal outstanding debt has grown at a rate of 22.67%. The outstanding central loans grew only at a rate of 15.16%. There has been little change in the composition of the outstanding debt. At the end of March 1994, Bihar's outstanding debt to the centre constituted about 58% of its total debt; internal debt accounted for 21% and the rest was due to small savings and provident fund. The amount of total outstanding debt has grown from just Rs 3147 crores in 1982-83 to an enormous Rs 13012 crores (about 400% during the last 11 years from 1983).<sup>3</sup>

Let us examine the strategy for repayment of these loans. Table 7 reveals that in 1982-83, the repayment of central loans amounted to only about 39% of total central loans. The share of repayment of central loans increased to an alarming 93.86% in 1987-88, after which it declined. It again increased until it reached an alarming 77.82%. In other words, only about 22% of the central loans can be used by the state for other purposes. As already noted, the 'other purposes' are for the repayment of other debts. There is thus no net accrual to the state exchequer for development and capital accumulation.<sup>4</sup>

**TABLE 4**

Composition of Investment in Bihar, 1993-94

Sectors	Aggregate Amount (In Rs Crores)	Investment Percentage distribution
I. Mining & Refining	3,683	18.61
(a) Coal & Lignite	3,132	15.82
(b) Refinery Products	248	1.25
(c) Mineral Products	303	1.53
II. Manufacturing	4,675	23.62
(a) Sugar	75	0.37
(b) Inorganic Chemicals	362	1.82
(c) Fertilizer	30	0.15
(d) Cement & Cement Products	23	0.11
(e) Glass & Glass Products	8	0.04
(f) Non-Metallic Mineral Products	23	0.11
(g) Pig Iron & Sponge Iron	55	0.27
(h) Steel	3,593	18.15
(i) Non-ferrous Metals	250	1.26
(j) Transport Equipment	256	1.29
III. Infrastructure	11,432	57.76
(a) Electricity	6,962	35.18
(b) Power transmission Lines	267	1.34
(c) Irrigation	4,203	21.23
Total	19,789	100.00

Source: CMIE, Bombay.

**TABLE 6**

Composition of Outstanding Debt of Bihar Government (as on 31 March 1994) (Rs in Crores)

	1991 Accounts	1992 RE	1993 BE	1994
A. Internal debt	1575 (17.1)	1980 (18.3)	2289 (18.5)	2837 (21.11)
B. Loans and Advances from Central Govt.	5780 (62.6)	6615 (61.3)	7533 (60.9)	7517 (57.77)
C. Provident Fund & Small Savings	1876 (20.3)	2198 (20.4)	2539 (20.6)	2656 (20.42)
Total (A+B+C)	9231	10793	12361	13012

**TABLE 7**

Repayment of Loans and Advance from Central Government, 1994

Year	Loans received during the year	Loans Repaid during the year	Interest paid in the year	Total repayment	Total repayment as % of total loan
1982-83	545.24	115.31	96.62	211.93	38.87%
1983-84	514.92	140.85	117.70	258.28	50.16%
1984-85	485.61	182.53	142.93	25.46	67.02%
1985-86	703.52	205.90	191.35	397.25	56.47%
1986-87	563.28	215.44	232.18	447.62	79.47%
1987-88	573.87	268.18	270.48	538.66	93.86%
1990-91	1002.78	250.86	404.96	655.82	65.40
1991-92	1134.02	299.30	562.97	862.27	76.04
1992-93	1224.71	306.61	646.49	953.10	77.82



The interest burden on the state has increased from 1982-83 to 1987-88 as Table 8 shows. Net interest paid has increased from Rs 122 crores in 1982-83 to Rs 311 crores in 1987-88, that is, by more than 25%. The outgoing from the revenue account due to interest alone has increased from about 19% of the state's total tax plus non-tax revenue plus non-plan grants from the centre in 1982-83 to more than 41%. At the end of 1987-88, it constituted about 20% of the state's receipts from the revenue and non-plan grants.<sup>5</sup>

**T**he interest burden on the state's revenue has since then steadily increased. In 1990-91, it was Rs 753.82 crores which increased to a whopping Rs 1263.86 crores in 1992-93, accounting for more than 42% of the state's revenue receipts including non-plan grants. This is probably why development projects continually run short of funds. On the one hand, while the state is unable to control mounting non-plan revenue expenditure on items other than debt servicing, a substantial amount of its revenue receipts go towards discharging its debt obligations. Debt servicing obligations are likely to take away an increasing chunk of total revenue receipts in the years to come, leaving the state increasingly short of resources.<sup>6</sup>

We have noted earlier that about 42% of the state's total revenue receipts and non-plan grants from the centre are used for discharging the interest obligations. The interest charges amounted to 6.53% of the total state income (1992-93) and this figure has been increasing over the years (Table 9). Per capita interest amounts to 6% of the per capita income, that is Rs 135.54. 15% of the per capita income goes in paying for tax and non-tax revenues plus the interest obligations.

This percentage has also been increasing over the years.<sup>7</sup>

The total debt relief provided to all the states has come down substantially after the recommendations of the Ninth Finance Commission. Till then Bihar had received a relatively larger share of

the total debt relief as compared to other states. Contrary to the general impression, Bihar's growth of tax revenue has been 14.8%, higher than in richer states like Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana and Tamil Nadu. Further, certain judicial decisions invalidating the Mineral Cess Act, the Degraded Forest Land Taxation Act and so on, have affected additional revenue mobilisation. The validation of these two acts alone could have brought revenue of about Rs 1100 crores to the state.<sup>8</sup>

*Escape from the morass:* It should be obvious by now that agricultural stagnation, industrial backwardness or fragile state finances are not the only indicators of Bihar's backwardness. Almost invariably, judged by any indicator of economic or social backwardness, Bihar is placed at the bottom. It is economically the poorest, socially the most backward and, what is worse, one whose polity and society is most divided. But even at the risk of being simplistic, it seems safe to say that Bihar's problems are basically economic. If one were to ask what causes Bihar's poverty, at least two broad structural forces, internal to the state's economy and external suggest themselves.

An absence of land reform is the most glaring example of the first, whereas

the pattern (not just the level) of public investment during the initial years of planning would fall under the second category. It is futile to debate which of these is the primary factor. But growth experiences elsewhere in India clearly indicate that the pattern of public investment played the most crucial role in ushering structural changes in those economies. While searching for an escape from this morass the internal structural weaknesses should receive more attention, despite the fact that external negative forces have probably done greater harm.

The process of reversal must be initiated by the victims of the morass themselves, namely the people of Bihar. Unfortunately, they are in no position to manipulate what is beyond their reach and capacity. But once the internal weaknesses have been reasonably removed, there is bound to be a simultaneous reduction in the size of the problem, as well as an augmentation of the state's capacity to face the external causes that threaten its economic health.

#### Endnotes

1. Shaibal Gupta, 'Formation and deformation of rural entrepreneurship: a case study of five districts of Bihar plains'. Paper presented in the workshop on Asian rural entrepreneurs in comparative perspective, at the Centre for Asian Studies, Amsterdam, 5-6 October 1995.
2. Shaibal Gupta, 'Non-development of Bihar: a case of retarded subnationalism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 September, 1981.
3. ADRI, 'State of public finance in Bihar'. Report submitted to the Tenth Finance Commission, 1994, unpublished.
4. ADRI, *Ibid*, p 78.
5. ADRI, *Ibid*, p 79.
6. ADRI, *Ibid*, p 79.
7. ADRI, *Ibid*, p 80.
8. ADRI, *Ibid*, p 81.

TABLE 8

Interest Burden on the State (Rs in Crores), 1994						
	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88
Interest paid	124.5	149.55	348.08	296.36	370.58	27.69
Less interest realised from all source	2.44	0.58	2.29	18.36	23.63	16.77
Net interest burden on revenue	122.06	148.79	345.79	278.00	346.95	310.92
Tax + Non - Tax						
Revenue + Non Plan Grants	611.23	697.11	839.28	1170.66	1206.86	1492.98
Net interest paid as						
% of total revenue receipts	19.95	37.51	41.20	23.74	28.75	20.82

TABLE 9

Interest vis-a-vis Per Capita Income, 1994			
	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93
Population (Lakhs)	882.50	907.12	932.43
NSDP (Rs Lakhs)	1832276.00	1883580.00	1936320.00
Per Capita Income (Rs)	2146.00	2172.00	2197.00
Interest (Rs Lakhs)	75382.00	100432.00	126386.00
Interest as % of NSDP	4.11	5.33	6.53
Per Capita Interest (Rs)	85.42	110.71	135.54
Percentage of PCI	4.00	5.00	6.00
Per Capita Revenue (Rs)	201.00	201.00	201.00
(Tax plus Non-Tax)			
Total PC Revenue + Interest	286.42	311.71	336.54
Percentage of PCI	13.00	14.00	15.00

# Bihar revisited

NIKESH SINHA

BIHAR has confused most people who have tried to understand it. First, there are the myths of perception. These view Bihar as an impoverished state with abysmally low levels of literacy; as an area bypassed by industrialization after brief halts in the early 1920s and 1950s; where land reforms are a misnomer and so on. Second, there are the myths of conformity. There are few systems that conform and it is easy to launch into a tirade either for or against what is happening there – or perhaps both – depending on the level of confusion one is born with. Never forget that in Bihar heredity plays a greater role than even serendipity. So, like a truant child, Bihar refuses to be shaped into a neat, well-combed puppet. It shakes its head and says *neti, neti* (not this, not this).

A judgmental approach to Bihar serves little purpose. It is difficult to draw conclusions as the parameters of judgment themselves frequently change. Perhaps it might be safer to resist being drawn

into arguments, concentrating instead on small sketches which might help in arriving at some decisions which, as T.S. Eliot never tired of repeating, may well be reversed the next minute. Eliot also said that time present and time past are all contained in time future: an axiom applicable to Bihar in a way that he perhaps never foresaw or imagined. For Bihar has a way of continuing in time and yet out of it, of being part of a conformist mediocrity yet showing signs of radical departure, of accepting last and sometimes leading from the front. In short, *maha* confusion.

Bihar has never shied away from standing established ideas on their head. A major debate among the leisured classes today is about the substitution of ideology by capital. Once the boundary was ideology; today it is capital – this is the theme of discussions in hallowed precincts like the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the India International Centre (IIC), ironically peopled more by Biharis than anyone else. It might surprise and even outrage them to be told that this radical shift of boundary took place in Bihar ages ago, long before this debate became fashionable in JNU's Periyar hostel.

To take an example: some years ago, when liberalization was still a four letter word, a gentleman (let us call him

\* The names of the *dramatis personae* in this article have been changed not so much to protect them as myself, for it is possible that those portrayed here may not like the world to view their activities from a perspective they consider hostile. However, this is just a precaution, for I do not expect *Seminar's* subscription list to contain their names and addresses. The seminar circuit, on the other hand, might have but they are gentlefolk and open to criticism.

Laalu Baabu) stated that he wanted to set up a unit to manufacture a chemical used as raw material in tanneries. He wanted my help to draw up a project report for the Bihar State Financial Corporation (BSFC). Having been fed on notions of correctness, integrity and so on, I asked him for details I considered basic to the report: the raw materials required; the source of power; was labour to be skilled or semi-skilled, break-even period, and so on. After listening patiently, he brought out a set of papers from a shabby bag which contained everything I hadn't really wanted to know about the chemical and was afraid to ask. One fact struck me as unusual: the total cost of the input exceeded output revenue! This turned upside down the entire logic of setting up an economic unit. That was his problem too, and we attempted to figure out a solution.

**T**his was my first experience with such a problem. Since the project promised the possibility of generating employment, I spent time and energy working out the details. But the economic feasibility of the project remained suspect. Laalu Baabu finally sighed and said: '*Sinha Saaheb, is se to accha hai mera purana phormula. Sab thik ho jayega.*' (My old formula is better; it could fix the uncertainty). I was intrigued. Here was a man with no idea about the financing, specifications and viability of a project and yet he had broken through. 'What is the formula?' I asked. 'Elementary,' he replied. 'First we fudge the figures so that we can take a loan from the BSFC, set up a rudimentary shed and a couple of units. We will then be eligible to get coal from the government quota which is about 300 rupees per ton cheaper than in the open market.' Then came the magic formula: 'We will sell the coal in the open market, which means making about 6 lakhs each year.' For doing nothing! '*Sinha Saaheb, jara sochiye kuch nahi karne ka 6 lakh, wo bhi tax free.*' (Just think, Sinha Sahib, 6 lakhs for doing nothing, and tax free to boot!)

I was furious. Today, however, I look at it differently. Laalu Baabu had

kept within the boundary set by capital. For one, he was definitely committed to returning the money to the BSFC from his tax free income. The reason was simple, if not honourable—'*agla project me problem nahi hoga.*' (This will ensure that there will be no hassles with the next project.) As for questions like forward linkages with other industries and employment generation — these clearly made no economic sense. The idea was to use state patronage to make money. The operative phrase was 'by doing nothing'. What else could it be called but a triumph of mind over matter. For a brief moment, when I demonstrated that the project was economically unsound, his faith in the parallel system was rattled. But soon he was reassured that his home-grown *phormula* would work better. To top it all, it was simple and cost-effective.

A vivid picture of Bihar that R.K. Laxman once painted and, I am sure still has, is about a curious blockade at the busiest *chauraha* (crossroad) in Patna — the Fraser Road-Dak Bungalow Road *chauraha*. His car was halted by a lone youth brandishing a hockey stick, dancing in the middle of the road with a lone-some menace that would have done Clint Eastwood proud. The traffic policeman stood by watching. So did several cars, auto rickshaws, cycle rickshaws, scooters and human beings, among them Laxman. India was once a great hockey power and, as is usual with everything in Bihar, on that day the past fused with the present. This was the wild east and the cowboys were back, protesting (in this case) the impending arrest of Pappu Yadav, Bihar's Billy the Kid.

**L**ater at the airport I asked Laxman if that temporary hiccup in the traffic had unnerved him. He gave me a baleful look and said, 'I am not coming back to this place.' Then with typical Laxmanese he added, 'I say, those guys were after my life.' This is the immediacy of violence in Bihar. Everything is personal or taken personally. The Biharization of Laxman took just four days.

Take the *nautanki* of scams in Bihar. The fodder scam alone makes for

a worthwhile subject of study. It is interesting not only for the sheer magnitude of *ghotala*, but for the breadth of its imagination. The statistics it generates, if used properly and fairly, can well provide the script for a drama like *Andher Nagri Chaupat Raja*. Consider this: 2000 chicken ate chickenfeed for a breathtaking Rs 5 crores. This means each chicken ate feed worth Rs 25000 per year. Loosely translated, this comes to Rs 2000 a month, more than the minimum wages prescribed in the state! Of course, we tend to overlook small gestures to medical firms, where Rs 100 crores vanished without a trace for medicines that did not arrive.

**I**n another case, roughly Rs 70 crores did a Bihari vanishing trick. The basic service provided in exchange for the money was the transportation of animals. Some trucks clocked more than 15,000 kilometers in a single day. That should enlighten you about of the Bihari's breadth of imagination. One recalls Don Maclean's famous song in American Pie — 'I am tired of castles in the air, I have got a dream I want the world to share/ Castle walls just lead me to despair....' Out here in Bihar, we make castles in the air, because they are safer. No threats of walls falling questions being raised in the state assembly. And this dream is shared by virtually all. Money for nothing, as Laalu Baabu would say.

Elections, the process of democratically electing the people you want, are another eye opener. Systems are dead in Bihar, we are led to believe. If you for a moment keep morality out of the picture, you can watch a parallel system take over with an efficiency that will astound you. Of course, you better be completely nihilistic in your approach because Bihar provides no leeway to justice and even-handedness. Take the bye-elections in Patna. The fight was more or less a direct one between the Janata Dal and the BJP. The first polling booth I visited was in Lodipur. Till about mid-afternoon the polling was peaceful and lacklustre and central observers had come and gone. Then, the rigging started in earnest. The BJP agents were told to push off: '*Aap ka*

*pad gaya, ab hamara padega* (Your votes have been cast, now it is our turn). They readily complied. Some distance away, in another booth in Patna city, the scene was slightly different. You had to know the code-talk to figure out what was happening. As a gentleman, conspicuously sporting a Janata Dal badge told me in utmost confidence: '*Yahan keechad me kamal khil raha hai*' (There is a lotus emerging from the slime here). The camouflage was impeccable; apparently a JD supporter, but covertly BJP. Appropriately, the movie running at Regent, the only cinema hall in Patna that shows non-pornographic English movies, was a James Bond thriller.

**D**emocracy and literacy acquire different intonations in Bihar, as I realised sitting in a small examination centre in Hajipur. Once a small town near Patna, Hajipur overnight became a suburb of Patna after it was linked by the Mahatma Gandhi bridge. It figures in the Guinness Book of World Records for having returned Ram Vilas Paswan with the largest margin of votes in a genuinely democratic election. The examination centre seated about 150 candidates. However, three times that number were milling around the centre. There, in the summer heat, I got my first revelation and felt much like the Buddha attaining enlightenment. I was being educated about education in Bihar. Having given me a once-over, my tutor knew he had an opportunity to unleash his English on me: 'It is very poor state, very poor. So peepul should get chance. To pass fairly. Good marks, good college. So peepul should get chance.' I nodded.

The chance was happening in front of my eyes. Three helpers to each student. The answers were being systematically worked out and passed on to the poor blokes inside whose only job was to copy. Literacy in Bihar was getting an extra push so as to be in tune with the rest of the country. The focus was clear: marks are the determinant of further education in our society. This was being met. Unfortunately, the High Court recently decided that education meant something

more than just a 'chance to pass'. The result – only 15% passed. At times it seems even Bihar is nonplussed by the sudden regeneration of ethics.

There are two Bihars that co-exist: one living by its wits and power and the other which by its complete renunciation of all wit and power, lives in complete submission. In fact, politically, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh have the largest number of Naxal groups. But the revolution seems far away. Even as the state withers away without support from Marx *baabu*, the path of revolution takes a shape different from the one envisaged by the very same Marx Baabu. Even the awareness of the rights of the poor is usurped by those who were till recent times downtrodden themselves. When power flows from the barrel of a gun, people forget philosophy. Or, having realised the power of the gun, they have learnt the literal truth of this philosophy.

**U**nfortunately, there is no hitchhiker's guide to Bihar. If there was one it would probably carry a terse warning: 'Dangerous place. Advise you skip it for fear of termination with extreme prejudice.' In fact, clean bedsheets in a hotel run by the state tourism department so moved a senior journalist that he wrote an entire article around clean bedsheets and the growth of tourism in the state. In Bihar we clutch at straws to prove that our ancient heritage of Ashok and Chandragupta (not to mention Sher Shah whom we have appropriated by virtue of his tomb in Sasaram) is still alive, wrapped in clean bedsheets.

Perhaps the only conclusion that can draw about Bihar is that today even a farce comes across as tragedy. Like the Indian cricket team, the less serious you are about Bihar the worse it becomes. Everything facetiously pulled down actually comes down. So what is Bihar? An onion, says a philosopher. You can unpeel it layer by layer. Each time you get only a bit. At the end you have nothing in hand except the smell and a sting in the eyes. I can't put my finger on it, but there is something rotten in the state of Bihar.



# The changing village

SACHCHIDANANDA

BIHAR continues to be a land of villages with nearly 85% of its population living in about 67,000 villages. Compared to other states in the country, its rate of urbanisation is slow; in fact, the rural psyche is one reason ascribed for its backwardness. However, life and society in Bihar, far from being stagnant, is changing quite rapidly. These changes are reflected in the social anatomy of the village: the breakdown of its solidarity, socio-economic relations between different caste groups, power structure, production relations, level of aspirations, escalation of caste and class tensions and living standards of the people. Village women are also on the move and a culture of silence, which had gripped the deprived sections of the population has been replaced by one of protest.

Any generalised picture of the changing village in Bihar will not reflect social reality as the state comprises of three distinct socio-ecological zones. Social changes in these regions are circumscribed by their location both in time and space. The region north of the Ganges is characterised by rolling plains, heavy rain, high soil fertility, and recurrent floods. It remains in the grip of the old zamindari system, marked by abject poverty of the bulk of its people. The population density is high with pressure on land continually increasing. Every year a large section of the population migrates to other states in search of work and the village economy of the region is sustained by money order remittances. Although the old landlords have left, large numbers of rich and middle farmers remain in the villages. The incidence of poverty and illiteracy is high, specially among the

extremely backward and scheduled castes.

Central Bihar has been the cradle of great empires. Its inhabitants are hard working and assertive. It has a higher percentage of scheduled caste population and the distribution of land is not as skewed as in north Bihar. A high rate of literacy has made people conscious of their rights, and social unrest in this area is due to a feeling of comparative deprivation. The deprived sections of the population have become assertive and no longer wish to escape their predicament through seasonal migration to other states. They are demanding a redressal of their grievances and want to see development in the village itself.

In south Bihar, with its high concentration of scheduled tribes, industrialisation and urbanisation are changing the contours of the rural landscape. The region is dominated by undulating uplands, hills and forests. The villages are small and density of population low. Mining activities in many districts have brought prosperity to the area. A large number of small scale and ancillary industries have mushroomed in townships providing employment to the people. They continue to live in the village and commute every day to work. This has changed the mode and tenor of village life. There has been a rise in the standard of living as also in the mode of thinking and level of aspirations. However, the villages located in the interior, particularly those inhabited by tribals, have not witnessed much change.

The transformation of caste from a sociological category to a form of political expression constitutes a significant

development in rural Bihar. The stranglehold of caste on people's psyche is a product of agrarian stagnation in the state. So long as agriculture remained the predominant socio-economic activity, the caste system provided a stable basis for social order. But when economic factors acquired greater salience, even the caste system was forced to change. With the proliferation of bureaucracy, and a rise in corruption and crime as a quicker means of accumulation, occupational patterns and social outlooks have changed. All political parties were forced to accede to the demands of the other backward castes for reservations in government jobs through the Mandal formulation. Thus, in the fight for scarce resources, caste became the important factor for social mobilisation. This explains the rise of casteism, particularly in those areas where other avenues of development are absent.

**S**ocial relations in rural Bihar are still largely governed and regulated by caste. Such relationships are characterised by the attributional aspects of caste. Although commensal restrictions still continue, sanctions against breaches have considerably weakened. Castes continue to be endogamous groups which knit together their members. However, caste has been split by class divisions—particularly among the higher castes. The development of agriculture strengthened the hold of intermediate castes both economically and politically. They further consolidated their position in the socio-political sphere. The movement for reservations for the other backward classes led to a permanent cleavage between the higher and backward castes. The social fabric has been torn apart by a sharp increase in caste consciousness.

The social anatomy of the village is fast changing. The top-most strata which comprises of higher castes and landed interests is being depleted. After the abolition of landlordism, many left the village and migrated to the towns, leaving the intermediate castes as the dominant and most influential group in village affairs. They manage their own agricul-

tural operations. The percentage of sharecroppers has risen. There has also been an increase in landless labour. This class is largely comprised of the economically most backward castes and the scheduled castes. It is this group that seasonally migrates from Bihar to Punjab, Haryana and other states.

**T**he break-up of the joint family is also proceeding apace. More often than not, brothers now live separately. On the father's death, landed property is divided among the brothers who constitute different nuclear households. Even in the nuclear family, change can be seen in intra-familial relations. The authority of the head of the household has been eroded. Women have acquired an increasing role in decision-making. Relations between brothers is no longer as cordial as before. Old age does not command the respect it previously did.

A rise in the level of aspirations among all sections of the population is evident. Studies of the Community Development years revealed the grip of fatalism on village people which had resulted in stunting their aspirations. Today, young rural men no longer attribute their problems to fate, blaming the government instead for not creating opportunities for growth in the village. Not content with poverty and deprivation, they are working to achieve a better quality of life.

The Bihar famine of 1966-67 acutely affected the poor peasantry in the villages. This provided fodder for extremist elements who incited the dispossessed poor, encouraging open warfare against their oppressors who were supported by the state machinery. The movement began from Bhojpur district and spread to neighbouring areas. The struggle eventually resulted in large scale encounters between armed agricultural labourers, primarily Harijans and some extremely backward castes, and upper caste landlords, their organised militia and the police. The Naxalite elements drew support from landless labourers. They first fought for a redressal of social abuses, specially the honour of their

women. Further, they struggled to improve economic conditions by demanding higher wages, homestead land and redistribution of government held wastelands. The educated youth resented social abuse and were determined to end economic exploitation. From 1978 onwards this resulted in an increase in atrocities against Harijans. The mobilisation of these groups encouraged the landholders to organise their own private armies. They set out to burn the huts of Harijans and to eliminate their leaders. The entire socio-economic order in Bihar was at stake. Upper caste landholders felt their prestige assaulted by Harijans who staked claim to village common-land which they had previously controlled. When agricultural labourers demanded payment of minimum wages fixed by government, employers felt threatened that the 'lowly' were challenging their privileged position. By 1985, the entire central Bihar region was in the grip of extremists operating under the banner of the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) or Party Unity workers. Violent incidents continue in village after village resulting in the killing of men, women and children. This has now assumed the nature of a feud.

**M**utual suspicion, distrust and tension between castes and classes has torn asunder the peace and tranquility of the Bihar village. In some areas people live in a perpetual state of fear and uncertainty. By 1980 it was clear that even in the villages the old Brahmanical ideology, which historically legitimised the dominance of upper castes in society, had been virtually destroyed. If the forward caste held onto power, it was only through corruption and coercion. No other ideology or social class was in a position to fill this void. The upper backwards could not be successors of the forward castes given their low status in the traditional caste hierarchy. They could not claim elite class privileges. This resulted in Bihar moving towards social chaos. The moral cement which held the old hierarchy in place fell apart. Every village became a theatre of conflict between the upper and the lower castes. The landless and the Harijans have

begun a struggle outside of the political process to overturn the entire hierarchical order. Just below the surface of caste conflict, an outline of a new class polarisation is perceptible.

Rural Bihar represents a society immobilised by a growing, if localised, violence. There is no overarching organisation that can coalesce disparate caste, class and ethnic groups into a single movement. It is a society caught in a political vortex of rebellion and repression. A coalition of the downtrodden across group lines, however, is yet to emerge.

**T**he most striking feature of contemporary Bihar is an escalation of violence. It is all the more incomprehensible in a state whose culture was shaped by Buddha, Mahavira and Ashoka and where Gandhi conducted his first Indian satyagraha. In recent years the social roots of violence have been irrigated by economic factors. A part of this violence is in defence of the social order and is institutionalised by the state or the private sector. The exercise of wealth and power in its most elemental form is the basis of other forms of social violence. The resistance offered by the deprived sections of the community to the terror created by private armies of the big landholders leads to violence of a third kind. In the villages the fear of authority is in decline. The police whose presence once instilled fear in the minds of villagers has become completely ineffective. It has lost its moral and ethical authority, due to its support to the oppressors. Poor policing in rural areas and high levels of corruption have demonstrated that violence and crime pays.

The migration of affluent sections of the community to urban areas, often after selling their landed property, led to an impoverishment of the village. Capital and assets were transferred to nearby towns and invested in business activities. The countryside has also been deprived of basic minimum resources for development. An escalation in the prices of industrial goods relative to agriculture produce has adversely affected the villagers. The

decline of rural and cottage industries as a result of an influx of factory made goods has crippled the rural economy and increased pressures on land. This has led to discontent among the rural population. An absence of proper educational and health facilities has further accelerated migration to urban centres.

Improved communication and the linking up of the village with the nearest urban and growth centres has provided employment for the rural youth. Such facilities have resulted in both occupational and psychic mobility. There is frequent interaction between rural and urban sectors of the population. Urban values are making deep inroads in the villages. Relations between persons and groups which were personalised or kin oriented have been replaced by commercial and contractual relations. The village economy is almost entirely monetized, resulting in the disappearance of the traditional jajmani system. The impact of urban values is reflected in the life-ways and thought-ways of people in villages close to urban centres be it in the joint family, women's status, children's education, or selection of marriage partners. The old dichotomy of rural and urban society is scarcely to be found.

**T**he number of children, both male and female, going to school has gone up. The demand for education can be assessed from the fact that people are prepared to pay for private schooling in the absence of decent government run institutions. The stress on education for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and girls, in both formal and non-formal streams, is yielding dividends. Most villages have a larger number of girl children with some years of schooling. Education has opened up new avenues of employment and has made them more upwardly mobile leading to a growing confidence and assertiveness.

Women in rural Bihar have also become mobile. A large number of voluntary agencies are working for their uplift and empowerment. The Bihar Education Project, through its Mahila Samakhyaprogramme, is organising rural

women in hundreds of villages, offering them organisational inputs like Mahila Mandals and income generating schemes. A number of women's saving and credit societies have been established for promoting economic activities which provide some cash without working as wage labour. The Integrated Child Development Services which cover about one third of the blocks in the state, have made women conscious of pre and post natal care. There is greater awareness of the growth needs of adolescent girls and children below the age of six. As this programme largely focuses on the poorer sections of the village community, they have benefitted to a great extent.

**T**he one silver lining on Bihar's rural horizon is the tremendous rise in social awareness among all sections of the population. This is largely the work of voluntary agencies, growth in education, the JP movement and the politicisation emanating from the democratic process.

The impending introduction of the new pattern of panchayati raj through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has opened up new avenues for the participation of the village people in the planning and implementation of development schemes. The three objectives of panchayati raj are:

1. Activating the Gram Sabha to provide an open forum for discussion on different village level projects and ensuring participation of the people.
2. Providing for representation of the weaker sections of the population and giving them a share in decision-making.
3. Empowering rural women through giving them one third representation in panchayati raj bodies.

These measures are expected to facilitate the process of social mobilisation for the development of rural areas. The people in rural Bihar are eager and anxious to participate in panchayati raj institutions and its objective of taking power to the people. The hope is that those who have so far been denied the benefits of development will finally have a say in the making of their own destiny.

# Bihar: old and new

A.K. LAL

BIHAR is a land of paradoxes with immense tolerance for incompatibles. It remains poised in the midst of inconsistencies. Its resilience permits drift to extend indefinitely. It takes time to get provoked. Its silence however is deceptive; its endurance does not necessarily reflect an orientation towards dependence. The political renaissance recent years leading to profound alteration in its power structure is reflection of a silent reaction by the masses to the traditional equilibrium of upper caste political exploitation.

Though the locus of power has been changing in Bihar, it was not allowed to percolate downwards in the caste hierarchy. It was fixed at the top with the lower castes remaining vertically tied to the upper castes in a patron-client relationship. This unnatural dominance lasted long in the absence of a movement for resisting the discrimination. Everything seemed to be lost. But, eventually there was a massive upheaval that led to a consolidation among the forces that had so far remained deprived. 'The emergent power structure is loaded in favour of lower castes. It has been effective in ensuring political representation to the new social strata. Inducted recently in the political arena, the erstwhile excluded have now acquired a location in power structure that was earlier denied to them.'<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the backward castes has altered the prevalent political equilibrium. Extensive political mobilization leading to tangible transformation characterises the present era. Primordial divisions in society seem to constitute the fundamental stuff of politics. 'The ascription oriented inclination however manifests

something additional. The transparent and overwhelming caste appeal has an ideological component. Lateral identities of caste and communal ethnicity in fact manifest perceived group interest commitments. It is a reflection of social solidarity representing identical political interests.'<sup>2</sup>

The rise of the intermediate castes to power in Bihar has had a significant impact. It has led to a dispersal of resources, specially by creating spaces in the bureaucracy for those who were till recently denied this opportunity. Such steps may deter bureaucratic manipulation of resources in favour of the traditional few. 'In a bureaucracy which is not oblivious to the caste, kinship and religious pulls, there are bound to be demands for assertive discrimination in favour of those who are under represented.'<sup>3</sup>

While this has weakened the concentration of resources in the hands of the upper castes, those with a headstart maintain their lead in the emerging opportunity structure. The deprived remained discriminated. Diversification of occupational structure in the wake of modernization favoured those who had the resources to avail of the opportunities. The spread of education, specially under private initiative with the financial support of the state, enabled the landed upper castes to appropriate the available career positions. Since specific castes dominate each of the universities in Bihar, such institutions have failed to enthuse the deserving among the poor and deprived. Entry to modern occupations thus remained

1. A.K. Lal, Caste and Politics in Bihar: A study of 1995 assembly elections. Paper presented at a seminar sponsored by the ICSSR, New Delhi, May 1995.

2. A.K. Lal, 'Segmented Pluralism in Bihar Caste Politics', *Mainstream*, 11 March 1995.

3. A.K. Lal, 'Politics of Protection: A case study of Bihar' in Vimal P. Shah and Binod C. Agrawal (eds.), *Reservation: Policy, Programmes and Issues*. Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1986.



restricted as it favoured those who were already better-off.

Affirmative state actions have been taken to correct the evils of negative discrimination against the socially inferior. This policy has led to a crack in the recently forged solidarity of the middle castes. The emerging party model has turned out to be intolerant and divisive. 'While retaining the Mandal umbrella, the main constituents are determined to push the others out. It represents a situation of conflict for appropriation of the fruits of protective discrimination.'<sup>4</sup> Politics seems to have split the recent alliance with the socially proximate remaining politically distant. In the present struggle for power, the dalit leadership tends to be compliant, unable to assert for the group whose tag it wears.

**B**ihar has an immense potential for agricultural production. The alluvial soil in its northern and central plains is highly productive. It has extensive cultivable area, plentiful ground water and a hard working peasantry. Nevertheless, agriculture remains stagnant. Bihar is not self-sufficient in food with half the population in its villages living below the poverty line. It is characterized by an unchanging and antiquated agrarian structure. Land-man ratio is the lowest in the state. 'While only 4% of all households operate over 25% of total cultivated area at the upper end of the distribution, about 67% of all households operate between them 18% of cultivated area at the other end.'<sup>5</sup>

The agrarian relations are characterised by exploitation and oppression. Land reform is a lost cause as land still remains in the hands of a few and tenurial security remain elusive. Wages are traditionally determined and remain pitifully low. Usury operates as a measure of social control. Bondage persists. Credit facilities are manipulated to suit vested interests. Poverty is massive and excruciating.

Inflow of financial resources to agriculture has benefited the landed. The prosperity generated by the introduction of improved technological inputs in agriculture has mainly benefited the landed. In spite of claims of industrialization the dependence on agriculture has increased after independence. Depressed agriculture seems to have inhibited industrial growth. Plans for development favoured the landed as the largest allotment in agriculture was for irrigation and power. To the helpless landed labourers, this situation resembled a tangled skein. They had pinned their hopes in the new government which seemed alive to their aspirations. Its failure to come to their rescue disturbed them. Even then, excepting sporadic incidents, they seemed to be lulled into deep slumber.

But such endurance has its limits. There is today a sustained uprising of peasants in Bihar. They are organized and ideologically armed; have learnt to resist, and refuse to be exploited. Their political support cannot be taken for granted even by those who are proximate to them in the social hierarchy. Slogans and promises no longer move them. The placid pool of life has been disturbed. Peasants have undergone a process of empowerment and their influence is on the increase. It marks the beginning of a bottom-up revolution. These uprisings provide effective mechanism for redressal of their accumulated grievances. In fact, this process is to a great extent facilitated by a setting promising equality and change.

**P**olitical parties are considered suspect as they have been indifferent to the sad plight of the poor. The vacuum has thus been filled by action groups which have the potential to alter the texture of the exploitative relationships embedded in tradition. In fact, 'the action groups are performing new roles that have emerged in the new context of the human condition: a condition of profound marginalization of millions of the people and the social and moral vacuum created by the indifference of the system in it.'<sup>6</sup> The

continued exploitation of the poor has embittered them against the entrenched. They want to disturb the low level equilibrium facilitating perpetuation of embedded configuration of power through concerted action of the organized, articulate and enlightened masses. They tend to be violent in their assertion. Peasant uprisings have now acquired the celerity of a storm; these are the initiators of a new politics for rural transformation.

**B**ihar's failure to harness the industrial potential represents another instance of its paradox. It is the most important mineral-bearing state in the country. Its locational advantage in respect of raw materials are evident. In the past Bihar enjoyed a place of pride in industrial production as it was self-sufficient in textiles. The raw materials for this industry were by and large locally available. Sugar and opium were once exported from Bihar. Its cottage industry produced agricultural implements. Today, industries are on the decline in Bihar. It does not produce even 5% of the clothes it needs and has to depend on outside sources for nearly every item of consumption. Its record in industrial production is far from satisfactory.

Large investment in industry has failed to steer the economy. It remains industrially backward. 'The really surprising thing about the economic development of Bihar is the failure of investment in heavy industry in the state to make an impact on changing the technology and way of life of the rest of the economy. Somehow, the multiplier and demonstrative effects do not seem to have worked in the state.'<sup>7</sup> In fact, Bihar's industrial interests remains mortgaged to outside concerns who are in control of its banking and industrial system. 'Persons resident in Bihar hold 8% of the total value of all categories of shares issued by companies registered in Bihar and 9% of total value of all categories of shares issued by

4. A.K. Lal, 'Segmented pluralism in Bihar Caste Politics', *Mainstream*, 11 March 1995.

5. Sudipto Mundle, 'Poverty and Unemployment in Rural Areas' in A.N. Sharma and Shaibal Gupta (eds.), *Bihar: Stagnation or Growth*. Spectrum Publishing House, Patna, 1987.

6. Rajanji Kothari, 'The Non-Party Political Process',

*Economic and Political Weekly* 19(5), 1984, p 220.

7. V.K.R.V. Rao; quoted in *Eastern India—an analytical study*. Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, 1982, p 47.

companies registered in West Bengal and working in Bihar.<sup>8</sup>

Private sector industry has failed to provide adequate avenues to the job-seekers in Bihar. Preference for outside workers is high. Even in public sector enterprises, Biharis have only a nominal representation. These concerns cater to the needs of outsiders who can find careers for their friends and relations ignoring local people.<sup>9</sup> The poor in the tribal areas have suffered the most; they have lost everything in order to provide infrastructural facilities for the expensive industries. This development has led to impoverishment of the displaced as well as the destruction of productive assets. The displaced persons are subjected to severe economic hardships. Besides, they are stressed culturally as dislocation ruptures their community and kinship support network. They feel powerless and alienated.

**I**ndustry has failed to trigger off a spread effect because their ancillary units are located outside the state. Management of state sponsored undertakings for industrial development is unprofessional and bureaucratic. These are afflicted by a soft work culture where a pliant management promotes unionism blended with casteism.<sup>10</sup> Productivity of capital and labour is low in the state and its per capita consumption of power the lowest. While profits from industry go to share-holders, the share of revenues from taxes becomes the income of other states where the companies are headquartered. Minerals located in the state are the property of the central government. The centre thus thrives at the expense of the state. Overall, Bihar represents a case of exploitation where the state is required to maintain the necessary infrastructure for industrial development, while the fruits of development are appropriated by the federal

government and private entrepreneurs outside the state. Nationalized banks located in Bihar too operate as repositories of outside interests. With commercial banking catering to superior class interest, mass-banking remains limited. Bihar is thus best described as an internal colony being exploited to usher prosperity elsewhere. It remains surprisingly reluctant to steer its people into action against the centre's continued exploitation. Probably it is waiting for the last straw on the proverbial camel's back.

**B**ihar is thus at a critical historical juncture. It stands at the crossroad of civilization. Poverty is widespread. Programmes have failed in the absence of a structure of participation. Exploitation is rampant. The man at the bottom remains unattended. Social structures are profoundly stressed. Polarization is sharp. Bihar remains at the bottom of almost every index of social and economic development in India. Semi-feudal production relations inhibit economic change. Its elite are bereft of social conscience. To some it represents the 'end of the earth'. To others it is a 'putrefying mess full of odour'. Its proneness to immobility, its semi-feudalism, the incidents of atrocities only produces interesting news.

Its economy is characterized as notorious. Its people are considered lazy and inert. Its leaders are bereft of cosmopolitanism. The exercise of power is raw and transparent. Corruption is not concealed. Affluence finds vulgar manifestations. The land that gave India its best over centuries is today in distress. Its downward slide is steep. It is, however, forgotten that further drift is impossible as Bihar has already touched the nadir. But in no case does it represent a lost cause. It is, in fact, on its way to recovery. The changes are visible in its power structure. The state is under severe pressure to mend its socio-economic contours. The process, however, is not that simple. Bihar is like a coin standing on its edge whose two sides represent diametrically opposite possibilities. The tilt though is in favour of change and equality.

8. *Techno-economy Survey of Bihar*. National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi, 1959. Vol. 1, p 14.

9. Sachchidananda Sinha, *The Internal Colony*. Maral Publication, Muzaffarpur.

10. Jai B.P. Sinha, *Work Culture in the Indian Context*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1990.

# A land called Mithila

HETUKAR JHA

MITHILA, in north-eastern Bihar is a cultural region distinguished by language/dialect, geographical environment, culture and historical experience. Early Vedic scriptures, like the *Shatapath Brahman* and the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* narrate several episodes reflecting the glory of this region. Valmiki's *Ramayana* speaks of the Videhas whose court was renowned for its culture of learning and of Siradhawaja Janaka whose daughter, Sita, was married to Rama. References to Mithila's culture are also found in the *Mahabharata*. The *Purana's* – *Vishnu*, *Vayu*, *Bhagavata*, *Skanda* and so on, mention the Videhas' efforts at upholding the value of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

However, these scriptures tell us little about the boundary of this region. Two kingdoms north of the Ganga – Vaishali and Mithila – were together known as Tirbhukti (or Tirhut) in the late ancient period. George A. Grierson prepared a map of Mithila on the basis of the spread of Maithili speaking community, according to which this region falls between the latitudes 25.3' and 27.5' and longitudes 83.8' and 88.7'. It covers about 20,000 square miles of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Samastipur, Saharsa, Madhepura, Sitamarhi and parts of

Muzaffarpur, Purnia, Munger, Begusarai, Bhagalpur and Santhal Parganas.<sup>2</sup> Grierson ignored the historical version of Mithila's geographical identity and eliminated the Vajjika speaking zone of Muzaffarpur and Vaishali. The area south of the Ganga was never identified as a part of Mithila, though Grierson included part of the old district of Santhal Parganas in his map. If the area south of the Ganga is excluded, Grierson's map represents roughly the cultural zone of present day Mithila. Besides, the south-eastern *terai* of Nepal spread over Saptari, Morang, Sarilahi and so on is also known as Mithila.<sup>3</sup> This cultural territory is overwhelmingly rural with about 15,000 villages and hardly a dozen towns, none of which have a population of more than 500,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Paul Brass estimated the number of Maithili speaking people to be about 1.5 million by applying Grierson's method of calculation to the data of the 1961 census.<sup>5</sup>

Several rivers originating from Nepal run through Mithila and join the Ganga at different places. Of these, the Kamla is the most popular and its sanctity is celebrated by Maithili fishermen in folksongs known as *Kamlas*. The Kosi, whose changing course has often devas-

tated Maithili villages, is called the curse of the region.<sup>6</sup> Most Mithila villages have tanks dating from about the 12th century A.D.<sup>7</sup> In the 19th century, Bihari Lal 'Fitrat' reported in the *Ain-i-Tirhut* that there were thousands of tanks in the Darbhanga.<sup>8</sup> These were a major source of irrigation. At the beginning of the present century, J.H. Kerr estimated that about 45,000 acres of cultivable lands in Madhubani could be irrigated by tanks.<sup>9</sup> Other than providing water for bathing, drinking, cooking and irrigation, the tanks constitute important sites for wedding rituals. This is highlighted in a number of folksongs sung by women during the Sama festival held on Kartik Purnima.

**T**he rivers and tanks define the environment of Mithila. Their green creepers and fish have a bearing on people's food habits. Fish is an essential part of community feast rituals and occupies pride of place in the royal crest of Darbhanga. The area is also famous for a rich variety of juicy mangoes. Its large mango groves, first mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, constitute a significant aspect of the village environment.<sup>10</sup> The *Varna-Ratnakara*, a 14th century Maithili prose composition, elaborately describes the preparation of a favourite Maithili delicacy, *chura-dahi* (flattened rice and curd).<sup>11</sup>

Several castes and communities inhabit Mithila. The first account of castes (*jatis*, not *varnas*) of this region was given in the 14th century by Jyotirishwar in his *Varna-Ratnakara*. He enumerated 41 *manda* (inferior/lower) castes, 13 trading castes, 13 service rendering castes, 17 castes residing in the forest and 71 septs of Rajputra. Interestingly, the communities currently identified as 'tribes' were then known as *jatis*. Rajputs were perhaps known as 'Rajputra' in the 14th century. It is from the 15th century that the word Rajput is used for a caste whose septs had been enumerated by Jyotirishwar.<sup>12</sup> From his account we learn that caste categorization in terms of upper and lower, and on the basis of residence and occupation had more or less crystallized by the early 14th century. Most castes mentioned in the *Varna-Ratnakara* still reside in

Mithila.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there are those indentified as Tirhutia or Maithil, for example, Maithil Brahmin, Maithil (Karna) Kayastha, Tirhutia Mali, Tirhutia Kumhar, Tirhutia Kamar, Tirhutia Jolaha, Tirhutia Dom and Tirhutia Musahar.

The category of Maithil Brahmins emerged as a result of the territorial division of Brahmins into Pancha Dravida and Pancha Gauda by the beginning of the 13th century.<sup>14</sup> During the regime of Hari Singh Deo, in the first half of the 14th century, the Brahmins and Kayasthas of this region organised the unique *panji prabandha* system of maintaining their genealogies, appointing scribes (known thereafter as *panjikas*) to compile and maintain the genealogy of each person from his earliest known ancestor (*biji purush*). This included the name of the village (*moola*) where the ancestor resided and the names of those villages (*shakhas*) where his descendants migrated and later settled. The *panji* also recorded their qualifying attributes, like *Mahamahopadhyaya*, *Mahamattaka*, *Mimansaka* or *Tashkar*.

**T**he *panjis* contain valuable historical and sociological information relating to about 900 years of the socio-cultural dynamics of the Maithil Brahmins and Kayasthas. Initially developed to maintain the rules of marriage in accordance with the prescriptions of the Dharma-shastras, even today no marriage can take place without it. Both Maithil Brahmins and Kayasthas have maintained their *panjis* from the 14th century. *Panjikas* took special care to preserve these manuscripts and passed on their knowledge to those (invariably sons or other family members) who could afford a rigorous training under their supervision.

The social consequences of this system soon became apparent. After *panji-prabandha*, *moola* (origin) became an important mark of a Maithil Brahmin's/Kayastha's identity. The subsequent process of involution can be traced to these *moolas* being differentially valued. Consequently, the Maithil Brahmin community was divided into four categories with the *shrotriyas* at the top,

followed by the *yogyas*, *panji baddhas* and the *jayabaras/grihasthas*. From about 17th century, one's *moola* and its maintenance became a matter of prime concern resulting in the hierarchical division of the Karan Kayasthas into *kulins* and *grihasthas*.

**U**pto the 17th century, concern for production and reproduction of knowledge was high and Maithil pandits successfully established their reputation in various branches of traditional learning.<sup>15</sup> They developed a tough system of examinations, known as *Sharayantra*.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the 17th century, when this system collapsed, Maithil pandits set up Mithila schools of Nyaya, Dharmashastra, Jyotish and so on. The discipline of Navya-Nyaya originated in Mithila. However, as caste considerations (based on the values of *moolas*) began to dominate society, this tradition gradually waned. As a result, the region slid towards decadence.<sup>17</sup>

By the 17th century the community of Maithil Kayasthas had produced several important personages, distinguished functionaries of local administration and eminent poets. William Adam, in a survey of vernacular education in Bihar and Bengal in the 1830s, found that 77 of the 80 teachers in Tirhut vernacular schools were Kayasthas.<sup>18</sup> Kayastha students were almost equal in number to those from the Brahmin community. In Persian education more than 75% of the students were Kayasthas as compared to 11% Brahmins.

The social reform movement against the prevalent evils of the marriage customs among Kayasthas, launched by Munshi Peary Lal in the 19th century, had a considerable impact on this community.<sup>19</sup> The orthodox Brahmins of the time were also responsible for several social evils like polygamy, known as the *bikaua* system. Though Madhav Singh, the ruler of Darbhanga Raj (1776-1807) issued an order banning it,<sup>20</sup> the practice continued to grow to the extent that in the second half of the last century, 665 young women were found to be widows after the death of 54 *bikaua* Brahmins.<sup>21</sup> During Lakshmishwar Singh's rule (1879), the forces of orthodoxy were seriously

tackled. He introduced English education, established a printing press and promoted the publication of works in Maithili, Hindi, Sanskrit and Urdu. An enlightened ruler, he helped put an end to the *bikau* system.

In Mithila, caste hierarchy became visible as early as the 14th century. In the course of surveying Purnia in 1809-10, Buchanan found Maithil Mali, Kumhar, Kamar, Sonar, Halwai and so on besides Maithil Brahmins and Kayasthas.<sup>22</sup> Risley too found some castes known as Maithil castes.<sup>23</sup> Thus, several castes have flourished in this region for a long time. Given their dominance in the field of Sanskrit learning, the commanding positions were held by the Maithil Brahmins. The Kayasthas remained their allies in both the exercise of power and intellectual pursuits. As a result the upper caste cluster successfully maintained its hegemony over the masses, in the process reinforcing and sharpening caste hierarchy. During colonial rule the gap between the elites and the masses not only increased but developed sharp contradictions because while the Brahmins received rent-free grants of land, the others had their land rents illegally enhanced.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding differences, all these castes are tied together, particularly through the Maithili language. The first evidence of literary production in this language is provided by the early 14th century Varna-Ratnakara. However, Maithili must have enjoyed wider currency earlier, because the Varna-Ratnakara records the existence of older folksongs like the *lori*, *biraha*, *veli*, *lagani*<sup>25</sup> – some of which still exist. Jyotirishwar mentions *Lorik nacho*,<sup>26</sup> popular among the non-upper caste groups, particularly Yadavas, possibly because the hero of the story, *Lorik*, was a Yadava. Though this folksong, sung all over Bihar and eastern U.P., is claimed by many regions the earliest reference to its existence is in the Varna-Ratnakara. This indicates that Mithila may have been its original home.

In the 15th century the great Maithili poet Vidyapati produced a vast

treasure of songs. His *nacharis* and *maheshvanis*, songs written in praise of Shiva, became popular and formed a unique genre. He also wrote several songs to Bhagawati and Radha-Krishna. His poetry influenced not merely the Maithili region but the neighbouring areas of Assam and Bengal as well. In Mithila this tradition was continued by others like Govinda Das, Manabodh, Chanda Jha, Munshi Raghunandan Das, who followed the Smarta way.<sup>27</sup> The Smarta which remained in vogue in Mithila through medieval and post-medieval periods was a liberal movement accommodating different cults. As a result Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesh, Durga, Kali and other goddesses of the Tantric cult were worshipped here. The Vaishnavism of Mithila, unlike that of Bengal which was chiefly inspired by the Bhagawat Purana, emphasized the divinity of Krishna without incorporating Radha-bhava which dominated Bengal Vaishnavism. This commitment to the Smarta way ensured that no particular cult could become hegemonic. Its later decadence was the result of the growth of caste orthodoxy, not cult-orthodoxy.

Vidyapati contributed to the Smarta philosophy of his land by writing devotional poetry. However, his songs also became part of Mithila's classical music tradition. The earliest known stalwart of Maithili music was Sumati whose grandson, Jayant, became a disciple of Vidyapati. Jayant's descendants continued to uphold this tradition in the following centuries. In the 17th century, Lochan prepared a treatise on the classical music of Mithila. Later, the Mullicks of Amta village (district Darbhanga) continued the Mithila tradition of Dhrupad. Raj Darbhanga, Madhubani, Banaili of Purnia and Pachagachia of Saharsa were the chief patrons of classical music. There was an equally vigorous tradition of dance and drama. The 11th century *Saraswati Hridayalankar* by Nanya Deva, the founder of the Karnata dynasty in Mithila and the 16th century *Hastamudrakalapa* by Mahamahopadhyaya Shubhankar Thakur are two important texts of classical dance produced in Mithila.<sup>29</sup> A num-

ber of Maithili dramas were written in the court of Malla Kings of Nepal.<sup>30</sup> Umapati's *Parijataharan* (17th century) became quite popular. In *Raga Tarangini*, Lochan describes more than 60 ragas prevalent in these traditions of music and dance.<sup>31</sup> It was at this time that the Tirhut raga, adopted in the tradition of folksongs, gained popularity. It was, however, the realm of folksongs that made Vidyapati the poet of the masses.

The common folk of Mithila constitute a world which lies beyond the pale of the intelligentsia. In order to understand the nature of the cultural life lived at the folk level one must be acquainted with the tradition of Tantrism, prevalent in Mithila since ancient times. Tantrism is the continuing cult or group of cults of Lokayata, which according to Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya<sup>32</sup> 'meant the philosophy of the people; it also meant the philosophy of this worldliness... those popular... beliefs and practices that are broadly referred to as Tantrism. Spiritual and other-worldly ideas were subsequently superimposed on Tantrism.' Mithila is said to have greatly contributed to its growth.<sup>33</sup>

Tantrism flourished because the Brahmanic order gradually tilted towards orthodoxy and excluded the women of all sections and men of the non-upper caste cluster from the Brahmanic/Vedic religious and spiritual activities. Such people were left with no alternative other than Tantra to fill the void. Tantra makes no distinction of gender, religion, varna or jati; its ethos is in fact anti-Vedic. Individual qualities alone matter. For example, the list of *siddhas* mentioned in Varna-Ratnakara includes some women and lower caste persons. Also mentioned is a *nayak* (chief/royal personage), described by Jyotirishwar as thoroughly disciplined in Tantric practices. It can thus be safely argued that as early as the 14th century, Tantra became popular in Mithila among men and women of both upper and non-upper caste groups. Chinataharan Chakravarti provides a long list of Tantra works written by Maithil Pandits between the 15th and 18th century. In fact, the



adherence to the Shakti cult among some Brahmin families contributed to the struggle against decadence.<sup>34</sup>

Central to the Tantric order is the worship of household deities known as *gosaun*. Unlike Vedic idols, the *gosaun* is represented by a piece of coloured cloth (*anchar*) which is hung from a platform (*peeri*) attached to the southern wall of a west facing room in the house. *Gosaun* worship is carried out exclusively by women in accordance with Tantric modes that have been in vogue in Mithila since the 14th century. One can find a *gosaun* or *gosain* in most homes.

Unlike the mandatory invocation to Ganesh on all ritual occasions, *gosaun* pooja starts with a song in praise of Bhagwati. All Maithil rituals, particularly by women, involve pooja and recitation of folktales and folksongs. This process is often accompanied by the preparation of a *yantra*, which is a painting in natural colours on either a green leaf or the cowdung plastered floor. These *yantras* which are used by women in the course of their day-to-day life and on the occasions of rituals, sacraments and festivals are known as *aripan*.<sup>36</sup> There are 19 varieties of *aripan*. As these paintings began to appear on paper and cloth they became famous as folk paintings of Mithila or Madhubanis. Madhubani paintings are unique because only women possess the skill to create them, given their continued linkage with the Tantric tradition.

Besides household deities, most village goddesses such as Manasa, Shitala, Kama, Kali and so on also belong to the Tantric order. There are *manukhdevas* (deified men/women) such as Brahma and Devi. The gram devata does not have any idol in its shrine and one or two pindas marked with vermilion representing the deities are kept on a raised platform. The only idol is that of Salhes, the god of Dosadhs. The gram devata priests come from non-upper castes. The Dosadhs worship Salhes and sing Salhes songs. However, on marriages and other important rituals, women from all castes visit the shrine of village gods and goddesses. Several Tantric sects mentioned by

Jyotrishwar still exist in some rudimentary form. For example, the Goraiya sect has a following among some non-upper caste groups though most are now *kabirpanthis*.

Many attempts to revive the region's folk songs have been made in the past. Ram Ekbal Singh 'Rakesh', Anima Singh, Lok Nath Mishra, Kameshwari Devi and others collected Maithili folk songs, which are now available in print.<sup>37</sup> But the bulk of them remain in the oral tradition. These songs are sung in over 150 styles such as parati, sohar, chumaon, kumar, lagani, batagabani, tirhut—just to mention a few. Although it is difficult to describe in detail the various styles of Maithili folksongs, some characteristics of this tradition deserve discussion. The women of Mithila (irrespective of their caste) learn the songs and styles of singing from the older women in the family. Consequently, they know the appropriate songs and can sing them unaccompanied by any instrument.

Another important feature of these songs is that several carry the *bhanita* of Vidyapati indicating that they were written by him. This, of course, is not possible. Undoubtedly Vidyapati wrote many songs, but others used his name as well. A popular legend has it that Lord Shiva was so charmed by his nacharis that he came to stay with Vidyapati as his personal servant. Vidyapati, thus, began to be perceived as a charismatic poet which led to the ritualization of the Vidyapati lore. Later poets used his name in the *bhanita* of their songs in the hope that this would ensure that their songs, if not their names, would remain in circulation. Over time, Vidyapati became synonymous with Maithili folksongs and transcended the literary boundary of the region. He thus became a great unifier of Mithila.

Most Maithili folksongs recreate the story of Sita's marriage. Practically every Maithili girl is perceived as Sita at her wedding. There are many songs sung by Dosadhs and other lower castes which narrate the woes of Sita, the only goddess outside the Tantric order worshipped by them. Rama, however, does not figure as

frequently. Barring the songs of the sohar style, few have themes derived from Rama's life. Krishna is popular but the most popular is Shiva as Bholanath. Gauri, of course, has a very wide clientele since she represents *gosaun* or Bhagawati in the folksongs. Thus Sita, Gauri and Shiva together constitute the common heritage of Mithila.

However, it is the proverbs, particularly *Dakvachanas*, which are used by all sections of this region. These sayings have been in wide circulation for several centuries. Though no one knows where Dak lived, he is no mythological figure. His Maithili proverbs make clear that he was a Yadava by caste.<sup>38</sup> He has over a hundred sayings related to the various processes and occasions of agrarian life and about the Hindu calendar of time.<sup>39</sup> He has been referred to in many early works, including 15th century treatises on astrology.<sup>40</sup> One can thus infer that these *vachanas* have been in use in Mithila since at least the 15th century. Astrologers consider Dak's sayings as authoritative, a fact indicating his popularity among the elite as well as the masses. Under the circumstances, he may be considered along with Vidyapati an exemplar of the cultural identity and unity of Mithila.

#### Endnotes:

1. See Shyam Narayan Sinha, *History of Tirhut*, The Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1922, pp. 1-3.
2. See E.A. Gait, *Census of India, Bengal, 1901*. Vol. VI, Part I, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1903, p. 320.
3. Shailendra K. Jha and Bhanu Jha, *The Economic Heritage of Mithila*, Novelty and Co., Patna, 1996, p. 24.
4. See Hetukar Jha, *Upanivesh Kalin Mithilaka Gam O Gamak Nimna Varga* (in Maithili), Maithili Academy, Patna, 1988, p. 4.
5. Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1975, p. 64.
6. Vibhuti Bhushan Mukhopadhyaya, well known for his contribution to Bengali literature, wrote *Kushi Pranganer Chitthi* in Bengali after he had made a long and extensive tour of the rural areas of the district of Saharsa devastated by Kosi floods. This work was translated into Maithili by Manipadma. See his *Kosi Praganaka Chitthi* (in Maithili), Maithili Academy, Patna, 1979. This work describes in detail the precarious condition of people and the village environment of the Kosi area.
7. Hetukar Jha, 'Socio-economic significance of tanks in the village life of Mithila', *The Social*

*Engineer*, Vol. 4, No. 2, July, 1995. ASSET, Patna, p 35.

8. Bihari Lal 'Fitrat', *Ain-i-Tirhut* (in Urdu), Bahara Kashmir, Lucknow, 1883, p 154.

9. J.H. Kerr, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Darbhanga District, 1896 to 1903*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1904, p 91.

10. See L.S.S. O'Malley, *Darbhanga, Bengal District Gazetteers*, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1907, p 7.

11. See Suniti Kumar Chatterji and Babu Misra (eds), *Varna-Ratnakara of Jyotirishwara-Kavishekharacharya*, Bibliotheca Indica, 262, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1940, pp. 68-70.

12. Vidyapati, the famous Maithili poet of the 15th century A.D., used this word first in his *Keertilata*. See V.S. Agrawal (ed.), *Mahakavi Vidyapati Krit Keertilata* (in Hindi), Sahitya Sadan, Jhansi, 1962, p 80.

13. See Surendra Gopal and Hetukar Jha, 'Introduction', *Bihar*, Vol. xvi, People of India (in press), Anthropological Survey of India, Seagull Books, Calcutta.

14. See R.S. Sharma, *Light on Early Indian Society and Economy*, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1966, p 148.

15. For details of the contribution of Maithil Pandits from the 9th century A.D., see Shyam Narayan Sinha, op.cit. and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya, *History of Navya-Nyaya in Mithila*, Mithila Institute of Post-graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, Darbhanga, 1958.

16. According to the system of Sharayantra examination, a scholar who considered himself competent after completing his studies had to declare in writing that he was ready for this examination. Then, at a particular place and time, all the pandits of the different branches of learning as well as people from different walks of life and of different sections of society gathered to ask him questions of their choice (both shastriya and laukika). The scholar had to satisfy every one by his answer; only then could he be declared successful and sharayantri. The last scholar to declare his candidature for this examination was Shridutt Upadhyaya of the village of Mangarouni (near the town of Madhubani) in the 17th century. For details, see Ramanath Jha, 'Ek Sharayantrika Vignyapti' (in Maithili), *Jigyasa*, Varsha I No. 2, July-December, 1995, pp. 7-22. The other system of examination was Dhout Pariksha patronised by the Raj Darbhanga from the 16th century. The mode of examination in this system was a disputation between pandits. It also commanded respect among pandits of Mithila and Benaras. But, Sharayantra was much more prestigious.

17. Parmeshwar Mahamahopadhyaya Jha, at the beginning of this century, bemoaned the decline in the value of scholarship and the rise of caste considerations in Mithila. See Parmeshwar Jha, *Mithila Tatva Vimarsha* (in Maithili), Maithili Academy, Patna, 1977, pp. 84-85.

18. See Anathnath Basu (ed.), *Reports on the State of Education in Bengal (1835-1838)* by William Adam, University of Calcutta, 1941, p 246.

19. See Jata Shankar Jha, *Report of the Regional Records Survey Committee, Bihar, Patna (1965-76)*, Education Department, Government of Bihar, 1978, pp. 49-67.

20. Madhav Singh's order against bikau system was referred to by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the famous

leader of social reform movement in 19th century India. See *Selected Works of Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, Publications Division, Government of India, 1977, p 171.

21. See Jata Shankar Jha, *Report of the Regional Records Survey Committee*, op.cit., p 90.

22. Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnia in 1809-10*, Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna, 1928, pp. 219-248.

23. See H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I and II, Reprinted, Firma Mukhopadhyaya, Calcutta, n.d.

24. For details regarding the processes which gave rise to contradictions between elite castes and the masses of Mithila, see Hetukar Jha, 'Elite-Mass contradiction in Mithila in historical perspective', in *Elites and Development*, Sachchidanand et al (eds.), Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1980, pp. 187-206.

25. *Varna-Ratnakara*, op.cit, p 2.

26. Ibid.

27. In this context, see B.P. Mazumdar, 'Vaisnavism in mediaeval Mithila (c. 1097-1350 A.D.)', *The Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, Maharajadhiraj Dr. Kameshwar Singh Memorial Volume, Vol. XLVIII, Parts I-IV, January-December, 1962, Section III, pp. 19-33.

28. Parmeshwar Mahamahopadhyaya Jha, op.cit., p 163.

29. See Shovana Narayan, 'Development of Kathak in Bihar', *The Times of India*, 1 September 1996; Parmeshwar Mahamahopadhyaya Jha, op.cit., p 150.

30. See Ramanath Jha, 'Maithili Me Natak' (in Maithili), *Sanskriti*, Dr. Aditya Nath Jha Abhinandan Grantha, Khand-2, Dr. Aditya Nath Jha Abhinandan Grantha Samiti, Delhi, 1969, pp. 269-296.

31. See Sudhakar Jha 'Shastri', *Mahakavi Lochana Krit Rag Tarangini* (in Maithili), Patna University, Maithili Department Fund, 1964.

32. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1959, p 7.

33. See Chintaharan Chakravarti, 'Tantra works of Mithila', *The Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, Vol. XLVIII, Parts I-IV, January-December, 1962, Part-III, p 1.

34. See Hetukar Jha, *Ganganatha Jha: Makers of Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 11-12.

35. Ramanath Jha, 'Vidyavachaspati Dr. Aditya Nath Jha: Parivarika Jhanki Aur Jivani' (in Hindi), *Sanskriti*, op.cit, p 9.

36. See Lakshmi Nath Jha, *Mithila Ki Sanskritik Lok Chittrakala* (in Hindi), Lakshmi Nath Jha, Sarisab-Pahi, Madhubani, 1962.

37. See Kameshwari Devi, *Mithila Sanskar Geeta* (in Maithili), Maithili Academy, Patna, 1980, pp. gha-chha.

38. See Govind Jha, 'Lokratna Jyotirvid Dak: Ek Mulyankan', (in Maithili), *Jigyasa*, Varsha-I, No. 2, July-December, 1995, Tantrabati Geeta Bhavan, Ranti, Madhubani, p 25.

39. See Jeevanand Thakur, 'Maithil Dak' (in Maithili), *Jigyasa*, Varsha-I. No. 2, July-December, 1995, pp. 35-94.

40. Ibid.

# Are Biharis uneducated?

KATHINKA SINHA-KERKHOFF

BIHAR and education – for many a contradiction in terms; for a few, paradise on earth. Its 55 districts have (had) it all: schools, kindergartens, colleges (constituent and affiliated), creches, sanskrit institutions, *madrastas*, research institutes, academies, engineering colleges, music and dance schools, medical and minority colleges, one of the oldest universities, the Bihar Educational Project (BEP), Total Literacy Campaigns (TLCs), adult and special education centres and last, but not least – the *charwaha vidyalayas*, set up by Bihar's greatest shepherd – Laloo Prasad Yadav.

In fact, Bihar has witnessed an impressive growth of both formal and informal educational institutions. Apart from hordes of illiterate unemployed, it is also the proud possessor of a great army of educated unemployed and an uncounted number of degree holders. Despite this impressive list Bihar's educational system is, to repeat a truism, a mess. Here you may find not only schooled unemployed but a growing tribe of unschooled educated (degree holders who never sat for any examination) and unschooled employed (through bribes and misuse of reserved seats and

scholarships) who cannot even spell their name in any language without making mistakes. Local newspaper editorials (both Hindi and English) never tire of mentioning these 'symptoms of the malady that has gripped the state's education' right from pre-primary to the post-doctoral levels.

**T**ake a look at some recent headlines in the Times of India (Patna edition), Prabhat Khabar, Ranchi Express, The Telegraph, Hindustan Times and The Asian Age (Calcutta edition). 'No economic demand for quality education'; 'Literacy workers assaulted'; 'Topper turns into a rank failure'; 'Trick or teach'; 'Inter results keep students on tenterhooks'; 'English medium schools or shops'; 'Disappearance of charwaha schools (for educating the backwards and the deprived) due to indifference'; 'Ranchi students, teachers take to streets'; 'Bihar still a long way from total literacy'; 'Hyped education programme proves a damp squib'; 'Minority schools plagued by problems'; 'Primary education scenario bleak'; 'UGC concerned over arbitrary promotions'; 'Education is the first casualty here!'; 'Irregularities galore in evaluation'; 'Sanskrit Shiksha Board alarmed at fake schools'; 'Teachers not paid salaries for ten years!'; 'Concern over fall in education standards'; 'Campaign against erring teachers'; 'Caste war comes to school'; 'Sanskrit schools, madrasas struggle for existence', and finally, 'Womenfolk treated as children of a lesser god: report'.

It is difficult to say whether nothing seems good in Bihar because of a defective education system or whether its deficient educational system is caused by the present condition of Bihar society. Concern is regularly expressed about the fact that classes are rarely held in most schools and colleges and that sessions and examinations are years behind schedule. Mass copying in various examinations and widespread corruption which result in frequent leakages of question papers are also mentioned as example of 'the stark reality of the collapse of the state's educational infrastructure'.

According to official figures, Bihar occupies the last position in the state list of educational achievements. Its literacy rate is 38.64% against the country's average of 55% (Statesman, 20 February 1996). The dropout percentage is alarming and female literacy is way behind other states. Though some regions 'do better' than others, the total number of literates (26.4 million) is depressing when measured against Bihar's huge population of 86.4 million. Newly-introduced programmes for adult education make slow progress in most districts. Bihar along with Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh belongs to the category of BIMARU (sick) states in the official documents of the Total Literacy Campaigns (TLCs) carried out under the aegis of the National Literacy Mission (NLM).

**N**ewspapers graphically describe the pitiable state of cramped and dilapidated school buildings – without roofs, toilets, drinking water, furniture or proper ventilation. Others bemoan that primary and middle school students are forced to attend classes in the open under the shelter of trees. The plight of teachers is no better: dearness allowance, medical benefits, leave travel concession, house building advance and so on, are withheld by the state government and salaries rarely paid. They suffer the notorious Bihari caste bias and are continuously transferred. Teachers are thus left to conclude that state education programmes are not to be taken seriously and need not be implemented sincerely. But another side of the picture reveals that teachers themselves are guilty of several lapses. Teachers, headmasters, principals don't take classes and force students into expensive tuitions instead, which they conduct after school hours. They abuse students, solicit bribes and are partial in granting admission to applicants.

School children do not always get the promised midday meal and rarely see the equipment allotted to their schools. They frequently receive wrong question papers and answer sheets. The stagnant economy is unable to exert any pressure

on Bihar's teaching institutions to improve. Little wonder then that the main problem facing Bihari youth today (educated or not) is unemployment. The global society of the 21st century seems light years away from this lost world.

**A**dd to this the common problems that beset the rest of India. These include a vicious and steadily increasing competition students are exposed to right from kindergarten. Among the middle classes the greater paying power of parents breeds a dangerous 'authoritarianism', determining what the child shall 'be' before it has learnt to think. Frustrated students poison, hang themselves or jump to their deaths (though reported suicide cases are much lower here than in neighbouring West Bengal), particularly if they fail due to 'computer faults'. Even this year, though efforts were made to streamline the education system by regularising sessions, results were not declared on time and several examinees were arbitrarily awarded single digit marks.

Students drop out at early stages, either from lack of interest or because their guardians prefer them to work or get married. Parents are reportedly too poor, ignorant, drunk or excessively demanding. Strikes, demonstrations, campaigns and *dharnas* highlight the irrational teacher-student proportion, rape and eve-teasing of girls in schools and colleges, arbitrary promotions and inefficiency, insincerity, dishonesty and callousness on the part of examiners and authorities. Others lament the 'commercialisation of education' or 'the high-profile, briefcase clutching child of the nineties' who has no time to read anything other than 'packaged information'.

English medium schools, newspapers insist, deceive parents; minority and other special schools are non-existent or neglected, and then of course there is the problem of the so-called brain-drain. Despite seminars, workshops and some new educational policies ('old wine in new bottles,' as one article describes them), the situation in Bihar, if one can trust media reports, is alarming.

But what do such clippings really describe – that Biharis are uneducated? No! The main conclusion after scrutinizing these reports is that there is an unfamiliar unanimity among journalists: Biharis lag behind and the contradiction is that the ‘uneducated Bihari’ is seen as both the cause as well as the product of this state of affairs. They are joined in this analysis by a great number of narcissistic Biharis who prefer to call themselves ‘backwards’ – a reflection, both of Bihar’s ‘national’ identity and its education.

So, are Biharis really uneducated? My past experience in the field of literacy as well as my recent study about youth in Ranchi provides some clues to the contrary. This is not to contest that Biharis suffer under an inadequate educational system. They either endure no schooling (formal or informal) or too much of it. Unfortunately, this distress has somehow become their sole marker of self-esteem. Young and old, those in the system as well as those outside, blame the educational system, and rightly so, for what they don’t have and can’t get. Despite suspecting the ‘freedom’ and ‘excessive openness’ of the West, most youth in Ranchi think that education outside Bihar, in particular ‘abroad’ (read the West), is better since ‘people are hardworking, sincere and there is no (or less) corruption and casteism.’

**T**hough not everybody is negative about his/her school or college, most are convinced that one has to leave Ranchi for decent higher education. The state of higher education in the rest of Bihar is even worse. Biharis do not understand that good education should teach people to cope with freedom (which is not taught in the West) and that their suffering is essentially caused by a lack of freedom. Education, imparted by schools or otherwise, teaches them not to think. Students know it is better to acquire facts than to understand.

Perhaps educational institutions in other states also suffer from the same defects, but in Bihar there is a difference. Suffering in Bihar has somehow acquired a special quality, a property that can even

stimulate a feeling of superiority over others. This needs some explanation. But first we need to address a basic question: are Biharis uneducated? In my view the uneducated can be classified as: (a) those without degrees; (b) those without any kind of schooling (formal, informal or non-formal); and (c) those without knowledge.

**B**iharis don’t lack degrees. They get degrees by buying them, by studying for more than 12 hours a day and not having time to read anything other than textbooks, through their family background, taking tuitions, or by mistake (luck?). But does it contribute to their perceived sense of development? (This, incidentally, varies according to class, caste, religion, gender and ethnic background of those living in the state.) No, it doesn’t. Mere possession of a number of degrees doesn’t help males or females (not even in the marriage market) to attain prestige, status, access to higher education, a husband or employment. The 3–5,00,000 unemployed graduates prove the latter. Though the value of certificates of various institutions differ, their worth outside Bihar is uniformly low. It is a well-known truism, and one which is part of Bihar’s national identity, that one can get a Ph.D. degree without writing a thesis, high marks and seats by paying donations to schools, and degrees by using fictitious roll numbers. Is it surprising that medical degrees of some colleges in Bihar are denied recognition outside the state?

Even ‘quality toppers’ from private schools affiliated to the all-India Board have learnt a valuable lesson: namely, that in Bihar one is likely to be unemployed unless one joins politics or leaves the state. The plight of females is even more pathetic. Without bribes, the Ranchi youth feel that even the reservation policy doesn’t work. As in other states, examinations mean cramming and the curriculum is unimaginative. Since education is a state subject, Bihari youth as well as their guardians and teachers feel that the situation is beyond redemption.

Let us now examine the second point: those without any kind of school-

ing. Yes, their number is indeed impressive. Admission to schools and colleges depends on the reputation of the applicant’s family, stated residential address, or name. Tribal languages such as Santhali are no longer included in the syllabus; so many in south Bihar do not understand the teaching and will thus never join any educational institution. Non-formal adult education programmes have to address masses of people dismayed by the idea that education doesn’t automatically mean development. Once admitted, students in regular schools drop out. It seems they find the school bags too heavy. Poverty, an unfriendly school environment and a dismal pupil-teacher ratio seem to be the main deterrents. Girls in co-educational institutions, in particular, are harassed and even if they are not, a fear of harassment is enough to keep them away. Those girls who stay are ‘suspect’. If, after all this, some make it to the finishing point, they are unable to attain the desired results due to a variety of reasons ranging from arbitrariness to just wrong question papers. But the point is: they all *know*. Biharis are not ignorant of the fact that there is no honour attached to teachers or learning.

**R**ather, and we come now to the last point, all Biharis – young and old, urban and rural – know that education means humiliation unless counterbalanced by material wealth. So most don’t join the rat race; they complain or just keep quiet. Yet the youth in Ranchi continue to hanker for a better education system – one related to the employment market.

Education equals socialization in this state. Its contribution to changing society is minimal. It teaches people to adjust, to accept the post-modern state of affairs in society. So people learn that this is Bihar, that politicians won’t change the system, that failure after all belongs to their ‘national’ identity. This might explain its lower suicide rates – perhaps the system’s only advantage! In Bihar people are less bothered – the educational system has taught them that it doesn’t pay to be an achiever.



# Interview

A conversation between **Chaturanan Mishra**, Union Minister of Agriculture and **Ashok K. Singh**.

*How would you describe the situation in Bihar today?*

Bihar in the days when coal and iron ore were in abundance had greater importance. It was in a better position because the economy was driven by coal and steel. In pre-independence days Bihar occupied the fourth position in the index of development; now it is last. The reasons are many, historical as well as social. The Congress Party, which came to power after Independence, was dominated by landlords. That is why Bihar could not achieve the desired progress and it lagged behind other states. Another reason for Bihar's decline is that the focus of development shifted from coal, iron and so on to areas with oil, such as Maharashtra and Gujarat. They

progressed, though Assam where oil was also found lagged behind.

*Is this the only reason for Bihar's backwardness?*

The advancement in science and technology opened up new opportunities. But due to the leadership's lack of political initiative, Bihar lagged behind. Few people were trained in the new disciplines. Unlike Bombay and Bangalore, which emerged as important centres of science and technology, in Bihar the leadership encouraged Sanskrit schools and madrasa education. I cautioned successive chief ministers and spoke in the Bihar assembly about its long-term implications. It was a wrong step. What will Bihar do with so many Sanskrit pandits and maulvis? Earlier, Brahmin pandits performed 'Satyanarayan Puja'. Now this has stopped. So many pundits and maulvis

have graduated from these schools; this has harmed Bihar. It was cheap politics.

*What significant changes have occurred in the last two decades?*

An important event took place in Bihar in the 1970s. This was the movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan. He called it 'Sampurna Kranti' or Total Revolution. Of course, that was totally wrong. But it did constitute a fight against corruption and was a struggle for the restoration of democracy. In this sense, it was partially positive.

*But a lot has changed since then.*

Yes. After that a new trend emerged. A cultural revolution swept Bihar. There was an upsurge among the backward classes and dalits who through various political machinations were deprived of power. Now the situation has changed. A new type of social upheaval has taken place in Bihar. This was led by the Janata Dal. Laloo Prasad Yadav was at the forefront of this movement. The communists could not take the lead though they supported it. They cannot identify with caste and failed to understand the essence of the new revolution. They sided with the movement but their leadership failed to provide direction to the new upsurge. Caste became the main factor. Casteism of an extreme type now prevails. Communalism too is raising its head and there is rampant corruption at all levels. You know what has happened in the animal husbandry programme. And the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha case.

*Can you ignore caste and casteism in Bihar?*

You know what Dr. Ambedkar said. He was clear that you cannot develop through casteism; you cannot fight corruption through casteism. He warned the nation that its salvation lies not in casteism but in the annihilation of caste. But the present day leadership cannot understand this. So today's Bihar is sick.

Only one positive development has taken place: agricultural production is rising. Actually, Bihar does not draw much food from the Centre. If properly managed, Bihar can produce enough food for itself. It is surplus in pulses and it is also exporting food. But the leadership has failed to capitalise on this success. They have even failed to launch a mass literacy programme. People are largely illiterate. The social upheaval that we are now witnessing is taking a wrong direction.

*What kind of social revolution swept Bihar?*

The national leadership, including myself, used to exhort the dalits and the backwards to rise against atrocities and exploitation. The Mahatma also said this. But what happened in Bihar after the Belchi massacre in 1978? The dalit and downtrodden themselves began to raise their voice against exploitation. They were murdered. Several massacres took place. But now they do not retreat. They may retreat in one place but hit back and retaliate in another. So it was a clear sign that change was taking place. But this was not

properly analysed by Marxists. Most people have started to protest and oppose Brahmanism and old values. There is a clash between what is happening in Bihar today and what was stated in the *Dharma Shashtra*. The people do not understand that they are part of a 4000 years old civilisation. It is because they fail to establish the link between the past and the present. This is a very big task and we are not enlightened enough to understand and find a solution. There is a big cultural void in Bihar. Old cultural values have collapsed, and they have not been replaced. But I must mention Mithila's paintings which have survived. The womenfolk are still painting.

*What role do you see for yourself?*

As someone born in the upper caste I could have done very little. There is so much prejudice against the upper castes. But a time will come when these things will go away and people in Bihar will start thinking differently.

*Did the communist parties fail because their leadership was from the upper caste?*

The communist parties were led by the upper castes; that is true. But this criticism is not valid. The Communist party of Bihar led the struggle against landlords who were mainly of the upper castes. And the land that the communists captured was distributed either among dalits or backwards. The leaders of the party should not be judged by the caste into which they are born. That itself is a casteist proposition. But the only thing that we can say is that communists failed to perceive the social change that was taking place. Our Marxists were not clear on this point. No other country in the world faced this problem. Communist leaders cannot be accused of pursuing casteism. Were they so inclined they could have left and joined any other political party. The communist leaders have all along fought for the dalit and poorest sections of society. But it would have been better had the Communist party also built leadership from among dalit and backward castes. But the issues were quite different then. Who is a communist leader? Either one who fought in the trade union or for agricultural labour or on the kisan front and they fought heroically. However, now a new change has taken place in political thinking.

*How do you explain the migrations from Bihar?*

They are taking place not due to shortage of food but due to an increase in population and a failure of the green revolution which did not spread to Bihar. Today, this is one of my main tasks: taking the green revolution to 70% of farmers; so far it has touched only 30%.

*Why is there so much violence in Bihar?*

The violence you see today is due to the change that is taking place in society. That is because the aspirations of the people are very high. In such a situation clashes are bound to occur.

# Changing images of caste and politics

WALTER HAUSER

THESE brief reflections on caste and politics in Bihar are meant to reinforce the recent and particularly sensitive observations of Ashis Nandy and Dipankar Gupta on the meaning of caste in the social and political calculus of late 20th century India. I will do this by appealing to a remembered past, of conversations with Shri Krishna Singh, Rajendra Prasad, Jayaprakash Narayan, and Karpoori Thakur, each of whom in their own ways were prominent players in the history of Bihar and of India in this century. It is a history which can only serve to illuminate the present, hopefully to give it a broader and deeper meaning than the accepted wisdom images of the moment. Or so at least the historian likes to think.

Those meanings imply almost as a given that in matters of caste and politics,

which by definition express relationships of hierarchy, status, and power, we are treading on contested terrain. This is as true in our images and perceptions of the past as it is in the experience of the present. There are in effect many pasts just as there are many presents, inevitably depending on who is making the observation. This is another way of saying that there is no absolute truth in the gloss which appears on these pages or any other. Indeed, it is the very ambiguity of image and perception which makes these issues of status and power worthy of debate in our efforts at understanding the phenomenon. And it is precisely these ambiguities and the permutations we employ in defining our individual and collective goals and identities which give to the political experience of India, or any true democ-

racy, its fascination and richness in 1997.

Before turning to that past I will draw briefly on the 1996 observations of Gupta and Nandy as points of departure. Referring specifically to electoral politics, Gupta tells us that 'caste alliances appear to emanate from secular and political factors and do not spring full-blown from primordial loyalties.... What brings about such horizontal solidarities between castes, is the extent to which their secular interests coincide, which in turn depends on their structural location in society.... If anything, caste alliances are shorthand ways of signalling a coalescence of secular interests. What needs to be appreciated is that these interests must really be powerful enough for castes to overcome their natural repulsion towards each other (in order to) form united fronts.'<sup>1</sup>

**W**hat this means in practical terms in the 1990s, Ashis Nandy argues, is that the political and economic growth of the middle and lower castes has changed 'politics beyond recognition.' Nandy is cited in the *New York Times* recently as observing that 'caste is now a principle of political mobilization rather than a matter of ritual distance.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed it is a process that has been at work for many of the years since Independence in 1947, and one might argue, as I do here, that the transition from the late 19th and early 20th century politics of culture, in fact began with the Council and Assembly elections of the 1920s and 1930s. It is a process obviously in constant flux and change.

This suggests that in this context, caste is neither unique, as the popular western press sometimes has it, nor is it static, unchangeable, and immutable as is also often assumed. It is rather the fluid and mutable qualities of caste, or more accurately *jati*, that make it one of the vital and dynamic identity markers of Indian society and politics in 1997. To assume otherwise in a cultural setting in which the idea of *sanskara* is a central element of the very being of vast numbers of Indians

individually and collectively, is to effectively deny one of the core elements of what it means to be Indian.<sup>3</sup>

**T**he point is not that caste is the sole identity marker in Indian politics, but precisely the opposite: it relates to and interacts with many different kinds of identity interests – religious, sectarian, ethnic, racial, agrarian, class, and I would add personality, and that it is these various combinations and re-combinations, which over time define the Indian social and political experience. If one looks at the world of politics beyond India, it would not be difficult to argue that this is not simply an Indian but a human phenomenon; witness the most recent evidence from eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, central Africa, the Middle East, or as I will suggest at the conclusion of these remarks, the United States.

Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, writing in 1940 about the Provincial Council elections of late 1926, and the Legislative Assembly elections of early 1937 in Bihar, commented on the role of caste and factionalism in the politics of those decades in terms that appear entirely familiar today. He writes 'that there is very little difference between nationalism and casteism, and it is a difference which disappears at a certain stage.... The only real difference is that caste covers a relatively smaller field whereas nationalism functions in a wider arena.'<sup>4</sup>

I cite Sahajanand here both as a comment on his prescient sensibilities about caste and politics in India then and

now, but primarily because he, in his own career and in his participation in the cultural politics and freedom movement politics of the 1920s and '30s, symbolizes the qualitative transition occurring in that politics. While that transition may have been gradual between then and now, it is nevertheless true that the political and social alliances which were to emerge full-blown in an environment of universal adult suffrage after 1947, were already apparent in the cultural and colonial electoral experience of the 1920s and 1930s.

**T**he cultural politics obviously took many forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But for the upper castes, now denominated forward castes, the caste sabha or caste association was one of the most common. And here the issues of 'natural repulsion', and 'ritual distance', among and between castes as described by Gupta and Nandy were very much at work. Put in its simplest terms, these caste associations were designed to define and articulate status identity and ritual distance by utilizing Indian cultural categories. Notwithstanding the Indianness of the phenomenon, as its elaborate vernacular literature testifies, it was at the same time concerned with defining its role vis-a-vis the colonial state, most often in terms of a loyalist political posture in the emerging constitutional environment of the early decades of this century.<sup>5</sup> I would argue that the 1910s and 1920s were the high water-mark of the phenomenon and that 1929 might well be taken as the turning point to what was to become the politics of democratic mobilization.

*Sangharsh (My Life Struggle)*, (Bilhta, Patna: Shri Sitaram Ashram, 1952), here pp. 480 and 296. Sahajanand was writing in 1940 during the early weeks and months of his imprisonment in the Hazaribagh Central Jail. It is useful to note that he was making these observations more than a half century before the current round of Mandal Commission and reservation politics in India and its multiple permutations in Delhi, Patna and elsewhere in the 1990s, and well before the reflections of the political scientist Benedict Anderson on the subject. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983 and 1991).

5. It is also the case that this element of loyalty was a reflection of the prominent presence of dominant land controllers and urban professionals in

1. Dipankar Gupta, 'Caste Chemistry', *India Today*, 30 April 1996, p. 41.

2. *New York Times*, 20 October 1996, p. E3.

3. I use the term *sanskara* here not in some formal, textual, intellectual sense of sacrament or ritual but rather as a kind of shorthand for the lived social and cultural experience of those Indians whose roots are grounded in the village atmosphere of their birth or their ancestors. In this sense it has to do with the values, beliefs, and practices across all caste boundaries whether Brahman, Yadav, or Chamar, as example. The definition which conveys these meanings most explicitly is that appearing in the *Meenakshi Hindi-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1980), p. 692: '(cultural) tradition, which becomes a part of one's being.' My point clearly is not to essentialize the concept and practice of caste and *jati*, but as I imply throughout this essay, precisely the opposite.

4. All Sahajanand citations in this essay are taken from the original edition of his memoirs, *Mera Jivan*

Sahajanand's role in this political history effectively began in December 1914 with his active involvement in the social reform movement of the Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha. Indeed, for eleven years he was its chief protagonist. The issues were essentially those of self respect and status recognition of Bhumihars as true Brahmans in the eyes of the wider Brahman world of eastern U.P. and Bihar.<sup>6</sup> But Sahajanand's political horizon was far broader than that of caste and status among Bhumihar Brahmans.

That politics (of culture) would soon overlap with his activism as a Gandhian Congressman from 1920, including membership in the All Indian Congress Committee and then the Working Committee of the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee. By 1926 those overlapping interests came into conflict when Sahajanand prevailed in having a nationalist Congressman named as president of the Mahasabha at its Patna session. This conflict finally resulted in the dissolution of the Bhumihar Mahasabha at its Monghyr session in the summer of 1929 when Sahajanand refused to accept as president of the Sabha the loyalist Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh. He was Minister for Local Self Government of Bihar and Orissa, one of the major public figures of the province and arguably the most influential protagonist of Bhumihar interests

the caste sabhas. These memberships of course varied from one sabha to another, as for example between the Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha or the Kayastha Sabha, another of the early caste associations in Gangetic North India. But the presence of Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh in the Bhumihar Sabha and Sachchidananda Sinha in the Kayastha Sabha makes my point nicely. I use the case of the Bhumihar Sabha in what follows to show what this membership and these policies meant in the political context of colonialism and nationalism.

6. Sahajanand was a *Dandi* Swami of the Dasnami order. He took the vows of *sannyas* in 1907 at the Aparnath Math in Kashi and assumed the *dand* in 1911. His family background was that of the Jujhautiya Brahmans who in the Ghazipur village of his birth in 1889, had both commensal and marriage relations with the more numerous Bhumihar Brahmans of the area. I touch on the specifics of this history in 'Swami Sahajanand and the Politics of Social Reform, 1907-1950', *The Indian Historical Review* 18: 1-2 (1991-1992), pp. 59-75. For a Hindi translation of this essay see *Iltis* 3 (1994), pp. 143-162.

in the province, if not in all of Gangetic north India.<sup>7</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that Shri Krishna Singh, himself a leading Congressman of Monghyr and the chairman of the Reception Committee attempted to avoid the break with Sir Ganesh which Sahajanand precipitated at the 1929 Bhumihar Sabha meeting in Monghyr. This despite the fact that Sir Ganesh had opposed Shri Krishna Singh and other Swaraj Party members on numerous policy issues in the Legislative Council. The irony of this politics is that it was in the same year that the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was formed, at the behest of a number of prominent Swaraj Party activists and Congressmen, in order to repel the efforts of government to introduce an amendment to the Bihar Tenancy Act, considered to be seriously unfavourable to the peasant tenants of the province.

The venue for this founding meeting of the Kisan Sabha was the popular Sonepur Mela in Saran, the home district of Rajendra Prasad and of Jayaprakash Narayan, later to be active in the Kisan Sabha, the Congress, and of course the Congress Socialist Party. Shri Krishna Singh was named General Secretary. Sahajanand was proposed as president, but he demurred, suggesting instead the name of Rajendra Prasad, already at that time the most prominent Congress activ-

7. There is a substantial literature on the caste association phenomenon which falls well beyond the scope of this reflective essay. However, Sahajanand's view from the inside so to speak, provides a compelling comment on the changing nature of caste and politics in 20th century India. He writes that 'caste sabhas were originally set up to present welcome addresses to officials of government and to pass resolutions of loyalty to the Raj. In fact what was happening is that the more clever among the wealthy were serving their self interest by making these appeals of loyalty and doing so in the name of particular castes. But with the changes which were taking place in the country this became less and less possible, and these people then sought to gain votes and electoral support through the caste associations. It is personally gratifying that I have been able to end both these practices through my involvement with the Bhumihar Brahman Sabha. It was at Monghyr in the summer of 1929, that the possibility of using the Sabha in these ways was given a final burial.' *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, p. 302.

ist in Bihar. History records that Sahajanand finally did accept the nomination as president, proffered insistently by leading Congressmen of the province. This was clearly Sahajanand the moderate activist at work within the Gandhian framework of Congress agrarian reform.

The economic and political clouds then already on the horizon would see a shift on Sahajanand's part to a militant class based kisan activism, and in 1934 and 1938 serious splits with the Congress both as organization and as government.<sup>8</sup> But in the 1920s and specifically in 1929, Sahajanand and many other Congressmen had started moving away from a cultural politics defined in terms of sectarian and caste sabha interests.

There were of course other events to mark this 1929 transition to a new and more open-ended politics, not the least of which was the Lahore session of the Congress in December of that year. Sahajanand, a member of the AICC at the time, noted that the zeal and enthusiasm at Lahore was almost beyond description. 'When the resolution on full and complete Independence was passed, it seemed as though a new world had come into being.'<sup>9</sup> But as Rajendra Prasad and Sahajanand would reveal, this did not mean that caste and jati were no longer factors in the body politic, but rather that they would be employed in new and more complex ways as instruments of cross cutting political mobilization. As we know, this was a significant factor in the electoral politics of nationalism before 1947, just as it would be in the democratic electoral environment of a free India.

These images were only vaguely apparent in April 1959, when, as a post

8. Sahajanand's transformation to an explicit commitment to peasants and the poor of all castes is graphically reflected in his rhetorical query. 'Where is the God of the poor? I will give my life serving the poor. Apart from them there is no other God in my heart. They are my God!' *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, p. 429. For his more extended examination of these issues see Sahajanand's *Khet Mazdoor*, especially Chapter 3. This text is available in the original Hindi and in my edited translation in *Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1994), esp. pp. 72-89.

9. *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, p. 346.



graduate research student, I met Shri Krishna Singh at the chief minister's residence in Patna. I had spent much of the preceding year working in the State Central Records Office examining the historical record of Congress and Kisan Sabha activism in the 1920s and '30s. I knew that Shri Babu had been one of the main players in Bihar politics and from 1937, the Congress chief minister. His insight and remarkable recall of the events of two and three decades before was no surprise. It was only later, when I returned to the State Archives, that I learned that Shri Babu had in fact requisitioned some of the very files I had been consulting to refresh myself in preparation for our meeting. This struck me then as it does now as a remarkably sensitive act of political and intellectual generosity. It also served to reaffirm for me, the substance of what Shri Babu had revealed in our interview.

**A**t this distance in time, several things stand out about that 1959 encounter. Shri Babu's respect for Sahajanand, for his integrity, his commitment to the nation, and his determination on behalf of the peasants of Bihar. For Shri Babu, Sahajanand's commitment and determination took two forms. First, in his nationalist efforts at the 1929 Monghyr Bhumihar Mahasabha, and second, that despite all differences with the Congress, it was Sahajanand's militant peasant activism in the 1930s which ultimately created the political climate that made zamindari abolition possible in the years after Independence. I should note here that barring the war years, Shri Babu was chief minister of Bihar from the time of the first Congress Ministry in 1937 until his death in 1961.

The respect the major Congress players in Bihar had for one another whatever their political differences, is important in assessing what they were saying to me in 1959 and after. Also what this tells us about the politics of the 1930s and the 1990s. I say this because Sahajanand in his 1940 reflection on these events was brutally frank about the politics of the '20s and '30s, and none of my informants—whether Shri Babu, Rajendra Prasad, Jayaprakash, or Karpoori Thakur

—took issue with Sahajanand's argument while always conceding his candour.

**F**or example, I refer to Sahajanand's comments on the 1926 Council elections: 'I can never forget the highly improper behaviour I witnessed at the time of that election. Among other things, factionalism of the most blatant kind characterized all party politics. Even the most prominent Congress leaders were talking and mobilizing themselves in terms of caste. This could not have been done openly but that it was happening quietly and behind closed doors was apparent to all. Based on my experiences not only of that election, but of all other elections since, I must say with due apologies for this apparent impudence, that most nationalist leaders of Bihar are fundamentally casteist.'<sup>10</sup>

Observing the 1936 ticket allocation process by the Provincial Working Committee, Sahajanand writes even more pointedly: 'There seemed to be no basis or principle on which candidates were being nominated. At some places faithful Congress workers who had suffered severe loss in the movement and had been imprisoned were left out and in their place big zamindars and their friends who had neither been imprisoned nor wore khaddar until yesterday were nominated. At other places persons who were well known among the kisans for their oppressions were offered Congress tickets. And there was wide reliance on groupism, casteism, personal relationships and friendships in naming candidates. I had never seen such manoeuvring and manipulation. I was amazed. I wondered to myself whether these were the people who would set the country free and who called themselves nationalists?''<sup>11</sup> It is following this reflection in his memoirs that Sahajanand observes that there is little difference between casteism and nationalism, and that it was a difference which would in fact gradually disappear.

In August 1959, at the conclusion of a two year period of research and on the eve of my departure from India, I was

privileged to meet Dr. Rajendra Prasad at Rashtrapati Bhavan. There I heard a remarkably similar, if more measured and qualified report on the same election. I was given fifteen minutes to pay my respects to the President, though my interest was of course in knowing more about his role in the freedom movement and more specifically in the political history of Bihar. Rajen Babu determined my interest with his very first question. The fifteen minutes soon became ninety as he responded at length to all of my queries. Rajendra Prasad was equally a man of candour and while less critically pointed than Sahajanand on the events of 1936, made many of the same points.

**H**e had made these a matter of public record in his *Autobiography* less than two years before our meeting. For example: 'Another peculiar feature of the nominations were considerations of caste. The Congress abhorred the idea but local circumstances compelled it to submit to it. It is a matter of shame that in Bihar, the PCC had to take caste labels into account in certain constituencies because the success of candidates there depended on such considerations. Further, we had to give adequate representation to all prominent castes. It is disgraceful for an organization like the Congress to do so but success in the elections was our first objective and secondly, it should not be overlooked that the Congress is a widespread organization consisting of people of all castes. The fact, however, remains that though from the point of view of practical politics our nominations proved a great success, we ought not to have even thought in terms of class or caste distinctions.'<sup>12</sup>

While the President was warm in his praise for Sahajanand as a patriot and spokesman for the kisans and while in his *Autobiography* he had conceded the differences that surfaced between them in nominating candidates, he said little about the split that emerged once the Congress ministry assumed office.

For our purposes the issue is not that Sahajanand and the Kisan Sabha cam-

10. *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, p. 295

11. *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, pp. 479-480.

12. Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1957), p. 429.

paigned vigorously on behalf of the Congress, or that there was ultimately a break between them, but that caste was a key element in mobilizing support in that election in Bihar as it was elsewhere. It might also be noted that while Sahajanand shared Rajendra Prasad's anxieties at what was happening, he too recognized this reality. Commenting on the group rivalries among Rajputs, Kayasthas, Bhumihars, and Maithils, Sahajanand notes that 'these factional rivalries, though they function below the surface, are nevertheless exceedingly intense. All of this is a great misfortune for us, for our province, and for the nation. But these are the realities and no honest person can deny it if he is at all familiar with the inner workings of the system, even though casual observation from the outside makes it difficult to cite specific examples.'<sup>13</sup>

**B**ut we cannot thereby presume that only high caste players, whether Bhumihar Brahmans, Rajputs, Kayasthas, or Maithil Brahmans were active in the politics of freedom or the politics of caste identity which preceded it and overlapped with it. Rather, we need to be aware of a more inclusive and deeper history which was equally important at the time and would come to dominate Bihar politics and much of Indian politics in the later decades of the century. Commenting on the politics of culture defined by the middle cultivating castes of eastern U.P. and Bihar in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the historian William Pinch observes that 'the shift from the cultural politics of the early 20th century to the political culture of the 1990s is not one that occurred as a sharp break at Independence in 1947 but has been much more gradual, indeed almost imperceptible. The implications of that shift are profound, signaling the demise of a political culture based on an ideology of martial power and the rise of politics based on democratic, demographic realities.'<sup>14</sup>

13. *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, pp. 296-297.

14. William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

Pinch goes on to note that the distinctions between these colonial and post-colonial realities had to do with achieving an identifiable measure of social and economic justice in a free India. 'For Kurmi, Yadav, and Kushvaha leaders, this would represent a sea-change in Indian political culture, since (the) Kshatriya identity (to which they had aspired) only had meaning in the context of a colonial political system crafted around visions of martial grandeur. In independent India politics would be predicated instead on universal adult suffrage and a commitment to the welfare of the nation's citizenry and would be played out by Indian party politicians seeking Indian votes.'<sup>15</sup>

**A**s we know, the way in which these groups came to define themselves in the social democracy of a free India was through mechanisms expressed in terms of backward class interests, reservations, and the Mandal phenomenon with which we are all familiar. It is precisely this set of issues and the process by which they have surfaced to which Ashis Nandy refers.

I will cite two brief vignettes from 1978 and 1979 to show that by the end of that decade the emerging political and economic influence of the middle and lower castes was indeed beginning to change 'politics beyond recognition,' to use Nandy's apt phrase. It was December 31, 1978, new year's eve in Patna. A mutual friend asked if I wished to join him in paying our respects to the ailing Jayaprakash. We proceeded to JP's residence in Kadamkuan and though he was unwell and heavily wrapped against the winter cold, he was in a reflective mood.

1996), pp. 142. See especially Chapter 4 and the Conclusion for more detailed comments on this transitional phase of the politics of caste identity, especially as it relates to the middle cultivating castes, and the earlier chapters for the history of these identity movements. For a more specific elaboration of one aspect of that history see Pinch's recent essay, 'Reinventing Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India,' *Modern Asian Studies* 30:3 (1996), pp. 549-571. It is useful to note that when Sahajanand refers to political factions in the 1920s and '30s, he factors in not only the four upper castes but also Muslims, Gwalas, Kurmis, etc. *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, p. 296.

15. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks*, p. 143.

He and I had first met at his Shekhodeon Ashram in Gaya in 1958, more regularly in Patna between 1963 and 1965 discussing his Socialist and Kisan Sabha activism of the '30s, and only occasionally thereafter. But this reflection turned to mild agitation when I raised questions about the reservations policy being pursued by the then Chief Minister, Karpoori Thakur. 'He is moving too fast. These things will all come in good time. We Socialists have been pushing these social interests for many years, and will continue to do so.' But the days when a backward caste political leader would accept that logic, even from the venerable and respected Jayaprakash were past, as Karpoori made pointedly clear when I met him later that night. This was a new and different day in the political history of Bihar and of India.<sup>16</sup>

**K**arpoori too was agitated at the claim made in the cover story of a bi-weekly newsmagazine that 'Bihar Is Burning'. My travels in Bihar had shown me that it was not, which Karpoori also knew and asserted. And he spoke with confidence, not because he was from the numerically small *nai* or barber caste but because he was a man of impeccable integrity. He spoke for and on behalf of the majority backward and scheduled caste population of the state by the force of his personality and by his commitment to a day of equity and justice for the marginal poor. Karpoori Thakur was succeeded briefly in 1979 by a scheduled caste chief minister from his own Janata Party, and he by a succession of five Congress chief ministers, all Brahmans and Rajputs. The current incumbent, Laloo Prasad Yadav is now completing his seventh year in office. In terms of longevity, this makes him second only to the first Chief Minister, Shri Krishna Singh.

We may infer from this fact and this history that politics has indeed changed

16. It is perhaps appropriate in this context to note that B.P. Mandal, Chairman of the Mandal Commission was from Madhepura in Saharsa district and briefly the Shoshit Dal chief minister of Bihar in February 1968. See *Backward Classes Commission Report, 1980* (New Delhi: Controller of Publications, 1981).

beyond recognition in India and Bihar. But we must also note that these changes have not emerged from a changeless past but rather one that has been culturally and socially interactive for many years and political generations. We may also infer that the appeal to justice, equity, and self respect of the backward and depressed sectors of society, which Laloo Yadav has employed so effectively to sustain his populist agenda, is not new. Those appeals too have a history and notable spokesmen. That makes their representations in the 1990s by Laloo Yadav no less important or meaningful, but places them in the larger history of social experience of which they are a part.

**I**t is that history and the images and perceptions of the major players and the people themselves with which I have been concerned in these reflections. It is a history which has served the identity interests not only of social, cultural, and political activists in this century, but of the people, the peasants and the villagers who were and remain to a very significant degree the primary constituents of that history and of the present to which we have now come. It is this reality, Ashis Nandy reminds us, which has receded in the mind's eye of most urban Indians. 'Our vision of India no longer involves the imagination of a village. The village for us now is primarily a place where strange people live, where sati and untouchability are practised, where Hindu-Muslim riots have been taking place for centuries, where the inhabitants continue to pursue the sports of homicide and robbery.'<sup>17</sup>

The reality of which I write is not meant to romanticize caste as an element of political mobilization in Bihar and India, nor to identify what might be perceived as its invidious influences. The effort has been rather to recognize the presence of caste and jati as active and dynamic elements in the cultural and political lives of the citizens of the state and nation. We have been concerned with the forms and transitions of these identity markers over time and the ways in which

they have influenced social and political experience in this century.

I began this essay as I conclude it, by suggesting that issues of social and cultural identity take many different forms in the human experience and that among these caste is one. Race and ethnicity, as we in the United States know well, are others. That issues of affirmative action and immigration were central to the political debate in 1996, as they are to the judicial process in 1997, makes this point well. And while the term *sanskar* is not widely known in the American lexicon of social experience, we do presume in our more reflective moments that 'blood is thicker than water.' This permits me to say as I did at the outset of this essay that it is not entirely accurate to suggest that caste is uniquely Indian. Indeed, we think what we believe about our respective identities, our own and those of our neighbours with whom we share the same social and cultural space.

**A**nd it is the politicizing of that process with which I have been concerned. The inevitable question of course is where do we go from here, what processes of change are now at work, what is the transitional stage in which we now find ourselves? Or put another way, are the scams and corruptions of Patna, Delhi, or Washington, and the judicial activism which they have generated, emerging though not fully understood reflections of the transitions in which we are presently involved? For the historian these questions must remain no more than questions. There are, however, two certainties in the democracies that are the United States and India. First, that government and politicians, and some would say the press, are under a large cloud of suspicion. And second, as H.L. Mencken reminded us, the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. It is after all true that whether their names are Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, or H. D. Deve Gowda, Laloo Prasad Yadav, or Sitaram Kesri, their place and position is held at the will of the people. It is their image of equity and justice which will ultimately be served.

17. 'The Village: Its Decline in the Imagination', *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 18 March 1996, p. 10.

# Anatomy of a massacre

BELA BHATIA

BHOJPUR was the scene of yet another massacre, this time in Bathani tola (hamlet) of Barki Kharav village in Sahar. Khera is situated at a distance of 43 kms on the Ara-Sahar road. A 3 km walk from Khera on the *kuccha* road brings one to Barki Kharav. Another ten minutes and one is in Bathani tola, the site of the present massacre. In the afternoon of 11 July 1996, 19 dalit women and children were killed (four of the children were less than 3 years old) while 5 sustained bullet injuries and deep cuts from swords and other sharp implements. Who were the assailants? What motivated this heinous and cold-blooded act? Why did they choose Bathani tola?

The sky had been overcast that morning. Fierce clouds and an interminable drizzle seemed to portend another onslaught of heavy rains. Under the weak sun, Bathani tola, tucked away in the midst of fields on all sides, was silent except for the sounds of everyday life. Naimmudin, a 35 year Muslim of Churi-Pharosh caste and a local leader of the CPI(ML) Liberation, hereafter CPI(ML), who was to lose five members of his

family in the following hours said, '*Hum bargad ke ped ke nichai baith kar khaini bana rahe thay. Aur bhidas-bara bhai sath baithe huai thay*' (I was sitting under the bargad tree and preparing khaini. Twelve other men were also sitting with me). Alongside, women were engaged in their daily chores, or were huddled inside taking an afternoon nap. Children, not deterred by whimsical nature, continued to play in the slush and mud, their cries and laughter making the day seem like any other.

But it was not a day like any other. A little after 2 pm, the inhabitants were jolted by the sound of gunfire. They realised that what they had dreaded for some time had happened. A mob of over 100 armed men surrounded their tola, firing indiscriminately. Panic spread like wild-fire. Shouts, screams and the sound of running feet rent the air. The women and men rushed to gather their children, and ran helter-skelter in search of safety.

In late April, as many as 50 Muslim and dalit families had run away from the main village, Barki Kharav, and sought shelter in this tola. Their new dwellings did not even have doors. Naimmudin narrates: 'Gathering my family together I put them in Marwari Mallah's house and ran through the fields, in ankle-deep water, to the neighbouring village of Chatarpur. I thought they would not harm

\* This article is excerpted from a larger report to be published in the *Lokayan Bulletin*. We gratefully acknowledge permission from the author and Lokayan.

\*\* Soon after writing this article, both Saddam and Babu, who were said to be 'out of danger' in late July succumbed to their injuries, bringing the toll of the massacre to 21.

the women and children.<sup>1</sup> Marwari Mallah's house with a large *angan* (court-yard) enclosed within a concrete wall had become a refuge for the displaced families as well as children like Kusum, who had come from the Mallah part of the tola. She was playing with the children of the displaced families. Her mother, Armanodevi later bemoaned, 'If she had not gone out to play that day she would have been safe.'

**T**he assailants attacked from three sides. The rising flames from the northern and western ends of the tola signalled that a couple of houses on that side had been torched. In the next half-hour another 12 houses were burnt, a majority of them belonging to those who had recently resettled, or to those who had dared to support and shelter them, like Marwari Mallah. The houses had been on fire for some time when it started to pour. And in the rain, the slush and mud, the killings began.

'Men carrying guns broke open the door and came inside. They started cutting *Bhauji's* throat with a *phasuli*. I was scared and hid under a *chowki*',<sup>2</sup> said Salma, Naimmudin's five year old daughter. She was part of the large group of women and children who had taken refuge in Marwari Mallah's walled house and had witnessed the macabre violence from close quarters. Inside the *angan* the women and children sat cringing, clinging to each other under the Mahua tree when the door finally gave way. Dressed in *ganjis* and *lungis*, the faces of some of their attackers were concealed with *gamchas*. But most did not even attempt to hide their identity. They were armed with guns, rifles, swords, *phasulis*, *kattas*, *gadasis* and *lathis*.

In the ensuing frenzy, the women and children tried to escape. Holding her 3 month old sister Noorjahan, Saira Khatun, Naimmudin's 18 year old daughter, was trying to escape when she was accosted, pulled by her hair and a knife thrust through her. She was later found in a position that suggested rape; her breasts had been cut off. According to other eyewitness accounts, she was flung in

the air and a sharp instrument thrust into her body as she fell. Nazma Khatun, Naimmudin's daughter-in-law was running with 6 year old Saddam Hussein when a bullet hit her thigh, making her fall. A little later she again tried to run with Saddam but had hardly taken a step or two when another bullet hit her, this time in the ribs. She fell and her hold on Saddam loosened. Saddam was then attacked by three or four men who tried to chop him down with swords.

Naimmudin's 40 year old widowed sister, Jaitun Nisha was found dead with 3 year old Amir Subhani in her lap. Her throat had been cut and a bullet had hit her in the ribs while Amir had been hit on the head. 60 year old Lakhidevi of Dhobi mohallah, Barki Kharav, who had gone to Bathani to return some freshly laundered clothes, tried to save herself by hiding under the *chowki* but seems to have died of asphyxiation. Marwari Mallah's wife, daughter-in-law and grandson, Raghuni, not yet 3, and 6 other victims were found burnt in the *angan*. Among other victims were Mua Kumari and Ramratodevi, found dead near their houses in the Rajwad and Dusadh end of the tola. So were Sonjharodevi and Balchand Chaudhury, who were shot and killed as they sat outside their houses.

**T**here were some who managed to escape. Among them were four children in the 6-10 age group, reported missing immediately after the massacre. They returned to their families from their hiding places soon afterwards. Children have ingenious ways of protecting themselves. 10 year old Rajudeen ran and jumped in the *aahar* (part of the traditional irrigation system built during the colonial period) and hid in a corner among overhanging shrubs. Similarly, Babban Chaudhary's children were found hiding in *kothis* (high mud containers used for storing grain), speechless with fright.

There were other survivors who will continue to be haunted by those searing images. Radhika, an 18 year old pregnant woman, who had come to her parents' for her first delivery from Aurangabad, related how in the melee she

and her 10 year old sister, Sunita, found themselves on a heap of human bodies where they lay pretending to be dead. When all was silent, thinking that the marauders had left, Radhika got up only to find that the killers were still lurking around. Panic stricken, she tried jumping over a wall. One of them ordered her to stop and even fired at her. She was one of the five who were found alive by the Bathani tola men who had been anxiously watching their tola from Chatarpur. Others like Hasina Begum, Naimmudin's wife, also kept a look-out on Bathani from the outskirts of neighbouring Ganj village where she had gone that morning to sell bangles. She returned on hearing the shots, and realised that her own house was aflame. Little Salma had by then come out from under the *chowki* and woven her way through the scattered, lifeless bodies to the bargad tree that stood witness to this holocaust. She too stood silently under it with her head bowed.<sup>3</sup>

**W**ailes and cries of anguish now rent the air, heavy with the acrid smell from the burnt houses. In the evening light, bodies lay strewn on the wet earth which bore marks of hundreds of desperate human footprints. As the men gathered for taking the wounded to a nearby hospital, policemen from a camp located just across a field in the middle school of Barki Kharav, finally made an appearance. When they asked the men of the tola to carry the bodies of the dead to the roadside, they met with stiff resistance. These protectors of law had turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the happenings of that afternoon. They could at least carry the dead on their own.

The laxity of the Bhojpur administration was reflective of the general apathy of government machinery: ill-equipped, ineffective, and often operating in an extremely biased manner. Initially, the district administration wanted to conduct the post-mortem in a makeshift camp at the road-side. Fearing foul play, the CPI(ML) activists resisted.<sup>4</sup> The bodies were then brought to the government hospital in Ara where, according to eyewitness reports, they were liter-



ally dumped in a muddy open space. No attempt was made to even cover the women's bodies. As a relative of one of the victims said, '*Marnai ke baad bhi garibo ki izzat aabru ki kisi ko padi nahi hai*'. (Even after they die nobody is concerned about the respect and honour of the poor).

**S**ituations such as these illustrate how the poor are even denied dignity in death, how class and caste haunt them till the very end. The Inspector General of Police as well as an AIPWA (All Indian Progressive Women's Association) team from Patna reached the hospital well before the surgeon. Angry CPI(ML) cadres broke some hospital furniture, so a case was lodged by the district administration against the two MLAs, Ram Naresh Ram from Sahar and Rameshwar Prasad from Sandesh. All that these cadres were trying to ask, first patiently and then impatiently, was whether the 'public' deserved to be thus treated by 'public servants'.<sup>5</sup>

Of the five wounded, little Baby (barely 9 months old with a fractured thigh) and Shailendra (16 months) were treated in the Ara hospital while Radhika, Kusum and Saddam were rushed to Patna. All three of them are out of danger, though the work of mending and healing continues. While Saddam and Kusum survived the attack, a bullet is still embedded in Radhika's left shoulder. This, the doctors say, will be taken out in due course. Though the quality of health service at Patna was reportedly better than in Ara, it was far from ideal. If doctors were available, medicines were not. The general situation in the ward improved after the victims of the massacre were admitted, as the CPI(ML) drew the attention of the media to the pathetic state of medical services. Ceiling fans were fixed, bedsheets given to all patients, and the quality of food improved.

When I visited them, Radhika wore a stony look and only talked haltingly. Saddam, born at the time of the Gulf war and named after the Iraqi leader, had a horizontal cut on his neck. His mouth had a deep gash needing about 10 stitches. A

nerve in his neck had been partially damaged, leading to a high probability of paralysis. Lying prostrate on the hospital bed, he showed the usual recalcitrance expected of a kid of his age. Rarely quiet, he asked to be moved to a more comfortable position, for his *mai* (mother) or Deena *chacha*, a medically trained CPI(ML) cadre who was tending to him. Running high temperature and in a delirium, he mumbled the names of those who had attacked him.<sup>6</sup> Beside his bed stood little Salma, wearing a bright yellow frock and a string of colourful beads around her neck, quietly looking at her brother.

**I** will now provide the backdrop, social and political, of the Bathani tola massacre. This account is based on field-work in Bhojpur during 1995 and 1996. The sources include interviews with the victims and their families, landlords and members of Ranbeer Sena, cadre of CPI(ML) and with government officials. I have also used secondary evidence from newspapers and related sources. I have tried to reconstruct the events as accurately as possible, though some gaps undoubtedly remain.

As the name suggests, Barki (big) Kharav is a large village of more than 400 houses, as opposed to the 100 houses of Chotki (small) Kharav a little distance away. In addition, the village has 3 smaller tolas, almost like separate villages. Tandi tola on the north-west has 35 dalit households, of Rajwads, Paswans and Kanu Savs. South-west of Tandi is Ujwallia tola of approximately 100 houses of which 60 are those of Brahmins and the rest include Kahars, Paswans, and Kanu Savs. South of Tandi is Bathani, a tola of 60-70 houses, including Kanu Savs, Yadavs, Mallahs and Chamars. South of Bathani tola is a canal, across which is Lodipur village (also in the same panchayat) with around 100 houses of Yadavs and Mallahs. South-west of Bathani is Chotki Kharav, with 50 households of Bhumihars and the rest of dalits including Chamars, Paswans and others.

The formation of these separate tolas can often be traced to some painful

experience of social or economic oppression which forced some people to forsake the place of their forefathers and reside elsewhere. Bathani tola is a clear example of this phenomenon. The original settlers of Bathani were the Kanu Savs. The Chamars were from Aurangabad district. Some 15-20 years ago, escaping severe repression by the Rajputs, they settled in Bathani where the villagers were kind enough to accommodate them on the government gairmajarua land. The other castes, the Yadavs and Mallahs, were part of the main village of Barki Kharav but had broken away after some instances of oppression. As Naimudin said, '*Yeh log shuruati daur se hi daman atyachari rahai hai*' (These people have been exploiters and oppressors from the very beginning). The latest addition are 18 Muslim and 32 dalit households (Kahars, Savs, Rajwads, Dusadhs, Mallahs) who decided to quit Barki on 25 April 1996, after one Sultan Miya was killed in broad daylight. They moved to Bathani tola for protection on 29 April. Later they built around a dozen mud houses, two to three families to each house. Nuclear families started living once again as extended families. Some residents of the tola like Marwari Mallah were extremely helpful. He opened up his house to them, be it for storing household items, cooking or sleeping. For this he had to pay a heavy price.

**B**ark Kharav is one of the few villages in Bhojpur and central Bihar with both Bhumihar and Rajput presence (Chotki has only Bhumihars). Significantly, both castes are equal in number (60 houses each), as well as in terms of land ownership. The Rajputs are settled towards the east (as the locals say 'Purwari Patti'); a little lane separates this from the 'Pachari Patti' where the Bhumihars live. The Rajput area is also known as Kharav Bujurg and the Bhumihar area as Kharav Chaturbhuj. Though these two upper castes together constitute less than half the total number of households, they enjoy uncontested supremacy. They all live in one area while the '*raad-raiyan*' (a derogatory term for dalits and backwards, meaning people who are below

them but stubborn) are scattered all over. Besides these two dominant castes, other numerically strong castes include Muslims (35 houses) who lived next to the Rajputs before they shifted, Yadavs (25), Koeri (20), Sav (25), Paswan (40), Chamar (20) and Dhobi (20).

Most of the land is owned by the Rajputs and Bhumihars. While 12-15 of them own land upto 60 bighas, a majority have less than 20 bighas. Similarly, most of the government *gairmajarua* land (both *aam* and *maliki*) is also reported to be under their control. A few landlords have also occupied around 1.5 acres of Karbala and Imambada land.

**N**otwithstanding previous history of exploitative and often oppressive agrarian relations there was relative peace after the wage strike of 1988, which lasted for four months. It was around that time that the CPI(ML) began to actively mobilise labourers in the area. *Majdurs* (labourers) from the three Barki tolas as well as from nearby villages had joined the strike. They demanded a daily wage of Rs 21 along with the traditional breakfast and lunch instead of approximately half *paseri kacchi* (1 kg and 750 gms of coarse rice). Oddly enough, given their feudal attitudes, their employers agreed to pay Rs 20 but not the additional rupee. Finally the CPI(ML) cadres resolved the stalemate by suggesting that the labourers settle and resume work. There was also an increase in the wages they received at harvest time. Prior to the strike, the harvesters received 1 *bojha* (headload) for every 21 *bojhas* of harvested crop. After the strike this changed to 1 *bojha* for every 10 *bojhas*. This increase benefitted not only the casual labourers but also the *halwahas*, known also as *bandhua majdurs* (bonded for one agricultural year).<sup>7</sup>

There had been other attempts by the dalits to politically assert themselves prior to the strike. Perhaps the most significant event was during the gram panchayat elections of 1978 when the people decided to challenge upper-caste hegemony and elected Mohammed Yunus, an educated and popular leader as the *mukhiya*. This greatly annoyed the

landlords though there was little that they could do about it.

The victims of the present massacre claim that even a few months earlier they were on talking terms with the Bhumihars and Rajputs. However, this stopped after a series of events which made them insecure. The first incident occurred in February 1996, on the occasion of the Karbala Mukti March organised under CPI(ML) leadership, when two upper-caste men from Barki Kharav were killed.<sup>8</sup> From then on, there was a perceptible increase in tension. On 24 April 1996, Gyanchand Bhagat (Ganeri caste) of the nearby Dhanchua village was found murdered in the fields at two in the afternoon. The two suspects, Jitendra Oza, a Brahmin youth of Ujwallia tola, and Ajay Singh, a Rajput of Barki Kharav, were both in their early twenties. No arrests were made after the event. On the night of 24 April a meeting of the Ranbeer Sena was held in Barki Kharav village. Early next morning, Sultan Miya, a youth in his early 20s, who was going to the local shop to buy some soap was killed by Ajay Singh and five other Rajputs of the village.

**A**fter this there was an incident over his body. Naimmudin, who always stood up for the interests of the underdog, even at the risk of antagonising the upper castes, managed to recover Sultan Miya's body. This earned him the ire of the upper castes. After Sultan Miya's murder, the 35 Muslim households realised that they had no option but to leave their present dwellings located right next to those of the Rajputs. Fearing for their lives, they decided to seek refuge in the neighbouring Bathani tola, a CPI(ML) stronghold. After securing the cooperation of the Bathani residents, they moved on 29 April with minimal household belongings.

On 30 April, the then Superintendent of Police, C.R. Kaswan (of the Arwal massacre fame), who had been transferred to Bhojpur just before the Lok Sabha elections in May, visited Barki Kharav. He sent for Naimmudin. 'I had nothing to fear and so I went when called.' But

he was in for a surprise. The SP told Naimmudin that he needed to interrogate him and that he should come to Sahar where he was arrested on a charge of murder. Naimmudin was kept in Sahar jail for 42 hours and then sent to Ara. He was produced before the CJM on 2 May. His petition for bail was accepted 40 days after his arrest.

**U**pon his return to Bathani, he realised that the displaced families had undergone many tribulations. They had been attacked several times, the locks on their houses in the main village had been broken and all their belongings taken away, including in some cases even the doors of the houses. Some upper-caste families had forcibly occupied their houses. Some of the affected pointed out that '*Sarkaar ne hi hamko yah dukh diya hai*' (The government has caused us this pain). Though applications were given both to the DM, Amir Subhani, and to the SP, C.R. Kaswan, no action was taken.

During the next two months the situation in Barki Kharav and nearby villages remained tense. There were several incidents of violence and even murder. One incident led to another (sometimes in retaliation) and this spiral of violence culminated in the Bathani tola massacre on 11 July.

Bhojpur, no stranger to militant politics, has been the site of a class-caste war since August 1994. The situation turned grave after the formation of the Ranbeer Sena, a 'private army' of upper-caste Bhumihar landlords of the district. Since its formation, the Sena has frequently made its presence felt in four blocks of south Bhojpur — Udwananagar, Sahar, Sandesh and Charpokhri.

Since most of the assailants of the Bathani tola massacre made little effort to conceal their identities, the survivors of the carnage recognise most of them. There is ample proof that those responsible for the massacre are members of the Ranbeer Sena. A new feature of the Bathani tola massacre, however, is the degree of Rajput participation. Until then, the Ranbeer Sena was known as a Bhumihar outfit, even though, like other

organisations of that kind, the Sena also hired goondas, some of them noted criminals, of other castes including Rajputs and backwards.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Bathani tola, the Rajputs joined other members of the Ranbeer Sena in large numbers and reportedly even led the attack. This is significant, given the history of antagonism between Rajputs and Bhumihars in the area.<sup>10</sup> The two castes had rarely joined forces in the same caste sena in the past.<sup>11</sup>

**T**he origin of the Ranbeer Sena is inextricably linked to Belaur village in Udwanagar block, the largest village in the district with an impressive Bhumihar presence of 500 houses.<sup>12</sup> Bhumihars, who call themselves Brahmarishi Brahmins, do not enjoy priestly prerogatives. They see themselves as Brahmins of a different kind—those who produce *dhaan* (rice) and give *daan* (alms) instead of begging for them. They are the dominant upper caste in the village today. This was not always the case. A century ago there was a significant presence of Rajputs too, but they were driven away by one Ranbeer Chowdhury. A retired military jawan, he organised the Bhumihars in the village for this purpose and led several fights against the Rajputs.<sup>13</sup> Ranbeer Chowdhury is popularly known as Ranbeer Baba amongst the Bhumihars of this area. He is revered as an exceptional person who fought for Bhumihar honour and supremacy. Every time the Bhumihars have to fight in order to preserve their rule, they turn to him for inspiration.

In 1993, Deepa Musahar, a mild and helpless looking *banihar* became the focal point of a clash. All because he asked his *malik*, Deep Narayan Chowdhury for his previous years wages. Deepwa, as the maliks called him had to be taught a lesson. They shut him up in a room.

This was not the first time that landless agricultural labourers had been maltreated by their employers. Belaur in this respect was no different from countless villages in central Bihar with similar stories of exploitation, oppression and humiliation. In the old days, the labourers were prohibited from even sitting on a

*khatiya* (cot) in front of their own homes. Even their guests were subject to the same rules.<sup>14</sup> In other villages, labourers were required to register the name of every relative/outsider who visited them with a particular zamindar. Backward caste boys were beaten up if they were caught wearing good clothes.

Another outrageous practice forbade young brides from sitting in the *doli* (palanquins) when leaving for their *sasural*. The *izzat* of dalit women has always been cheap, and many prominent upper-caste men have been involved in rape. In the present case, the son of Deep Narayan Chowdhury was alleged to have raped several women. Quite unconcerned, he once commented, '*Maine saand pala hai*' (I have raised a bull).

In his dealing with Deepa Musahar, however, Deep Narayan Chowdhury had not reckoned with the changed times. No sooner had news of this event reached the other labourers, a *rasta roko* was organised by the local members of the CPI(ML) and the Belaur road (the main thoroughfare linking Ara with Sahar) was blocked. On the intervention of the local administration and police Deep Narayan was forced to release Deepa Musahar. Some Bhumihar leaders—Deep Narayan Chowdhury, Dharichan Chowdhury and the panchayat mukhiya, Shiv Narayan Chowdhury—who were to play a crucial role in the bloody events that followed, perceived a threat from the CPI(ML) base in the village. This led to their mobilisation in the shape of the Ranbeer Sena. Though formally banned in November 1995, the Ranbeer Sena continues to operate in the area. The Bathani tola massacre is a case in point.

**I**would now like to share a few reflections on some aspects of the Bathani tola massacre. Neither caste senas nor massacres are a new phenomenon in the state. These can be understood only in the context of the agrarian reality. The highest levels of poverty in the country, the second-highest proportion of agricultural labourers, second-lowest literacy levels, a slow rate of urbanisation, collapse of all public services, an absence of infra-

structure, ill-managed agricultural and industrial sectors, along with a near-total breakdown of governance—all have contributed to a sense of widespread chaos and anarchy. Endemic inequalities, both economic and social, and few opportunities for employment, have forced a large number of people to live in sub-human conditions. The upper classes, unwilling to change, try to hold on to their old power. '*Hum raja hai, raja thai aur raja rahengai*' (I was the king, I am the king and shall continue to be the king).

The Naxalite groups have challenged this feudal attitude over the last three decades. This has met with a sharp response in the form of caste senas—a last-ditch attempt by upper caste forces to retain and consolidate their class interests.<sup>15</sup> This politics of 'power' finds expression in a corresponding politics of 'fear'. The history of class struggle in Bihar, therefore, is accompanied by a simultaneous history of caste senas and massacres.

**T**he exceptionally barbaric nature of the Bathani tola massacre shocked many. Described as the 'worst massacre' in central Bihar's recent history, it renewed memories of other equally gruesome massacres like Parasbigha and Pipra (1980) when dalits were burnt alive in an open fire, or the Dalelchak-Baghaura (1987) and Bara (1992) massacres when the throats of Rajputs and Bhumihars were slit by members of the Maoist Communist Centre.

There are, of course, factual details which distinguish one massacre from another (the modus operandi, the cruelty involved, the number of killers and victims, and so on). However, speculation about whether or not a particular massacre is the 'worst' means little. Massacres are massacres—manifestations of collective violence by one group of humans on another, with the perpetrators often rationalizing their violence as 'just'.

Some, including the CPI(ML), have interpreted the Bathani tola massacre in communal terms. Based on my fieldwork and personal interviews, I would argue otherwise. The fact that many of the

victims of this massacre were Muslims, that Naimuddin's family was clearly targetted, that the Karbala and Imambada lands were encroached upon by the upper caste landlords, or that the Ranbeer Sena enjoys the patronage of the BJP, does not necessarily imply that this incident was communal.<sup>16</sup>

In the present context, the Muslim identity of the victims is less significant; it is their dalit identity, their organisation and consequent resistance against landed interests which has earned them the wrath of upper-caste landlords. The Muslims, like the dalits, are part of an ongoing agrarian conflict with the upper-caste Hindus. They enjoy the overwhelming support of the lower-caste Hindus, their *saathis* in the struggle. To give this incident a communal colour is to introduce an element in the present context which does not exist.

**T**he role of the government – before, during and after the massacre – has come under critical scrutiny. The complicity of state institutions with the Ranbeer Sena exposes the shallow commitment of the present Bihar government to 'social justice' – in sharp contrast to the official pretensions and common perceptions of the Laloo Prasad regime. Glaring evidence of this complicity is provided by the presence of more than three police camps in the immediate vicinity (within 1.5 kms) of Bathani tola at the time of the massacre. These camps included more than 30 police personnel, who could not have been unaware of what was going on (for several hours), but took no action. After his visit to Bathani tola, the union Home Minister, Indrajit Gupta, admitted that the massacre exposed the total failure of the police administration in Bihar.

Also significant is the fact that the Janata Dal decided to ally locally with the BJP (known to be a patron of the Ranbeer Sena) in Bhojpur district. In 1995, at a public meeting in Bhojpur, Laloo Prasad Yadav is known to have remarked that, '*Malai ko Bhojpur se ukharne ke liye mai narak ki takato sai bhi samjhota karne ke liye taiyar hoon*' (In order to uproot CPI-ML from Bhojpur, I am ready to

compromise with the forces of hell). During the Lok Sabha election campaign, Chandradev Prasad Varma (present Union Minister), the JD candidate from Ara, even demanded that the official ban on Ranbeer Sena be lifted.<sup>17</sup>

**A**fter the massacre, government response was limited to on-the-spot visits and announcing the usual developmental package – cash payment of Rs 100,000 per victim, the building of a school, rations, and so on. Indeed, people of central Bihar become entitled to 'development' only after a massacre. However, no government – past or present – has bothered to implement land reforms or to ensure the payment of minimum wages, which could go a long way in mitigating the causes of conflict. These deeper issues remain unresolved.

If only one could label this as the last massacre. But an end to violence and a lasting peace can be achieved only if accompanied by justice and a respect for human rights of all people.

#### Endnotes

1. According to another version of the sequence of events, the men of the tola initially tried to counter the attack with arms. After realising that they were outnumbered, they fled after ensuring the safety of the women and children.

2. As reported in Ajay Singh, '*Inka kasur kya tha?*', *Hindustan* (Patna), 20 July 1996.

3. Op. cit.

4. This was not the first time that the local people and the CPI(ML) had protested against the propensity of the Bhojpur police to disregard official norms and procedures. A similar situation had arisen during the post-mortem of the victims of the Chandi massacre in February 1996. In spite of protests by the relatives of the victims and the local CPI(ML) cadres, the police administration deemed it fit to bring a group of doctors to the police chowki and conduct the post-mortem there.

5. The post-mortem report excluded certain crucial aspects like the fact that the breasts of one of the victims had been cut off.

6. The reference here was to Manoj Singh (20 years) and Santosh Singh (25), sons of Deepan Singh, Mukesh Singh (25) also known as Bela Singh, and Subaidar Singh (35), a retired military jawan with a criminal record.

7. As in other villages, in this village too the strike had desirable side-effects in helping break some of the social restrictions by the upper castes. Even though the Rajputs do not have a social taboo on ploughing as do the Bhumihars, in practice they are not seen to be very different from them. As one labourer said, '*Pahle woh bas chata le kar uari par in baithte thay*' (With an umbrella to protect them

from the sun, they used to sit at the edge of the field). During the four months of the strike, they were seen not only to plough but also to sow and transplant. 8. The circumstances of these killings are not entirely clear. According to CPI(ML) sources, an attempt was made by upper caste hoodlums to violently disrupt the march; the killings occurred in the tussle that followed.

9. The Naxalites have a significant presence in Rajput villages as well. In villages like Dharampur, Bhatoli, Bihta, Dhanwar, and so on there has been a continuing conflict between the Rajput landlords and the CPI(ML). However, there is no evidence of Ranbeer Sena having a base in a Rajput village.

10. A Rajput landlord of Sarathua village, reiterating this point told me that, '*Rajputo aur Bhumiharo mai chhabis ka rishta hai*'. This often took falsely implicating each other. A good example is the Sarathua massacre in July 1995. In the initial phase of the Ranbeer Sena the Bhumihar leadership was keen that the Rajputs of the area also join them. They tried to ensure this by spreading a rumour that the Rajputs of Sarathua were responsible for the massacre (Rajputs are the dominant upper-caste in that village). However, their plans were foiled when two survivors of the massacre filed an FIR clearly naming Bhumihars of Belaur, Khopira and Ekwari villages as the prime accused.

11. One exception is the Kisan Sangh, a caste sena which includes members of several landed castes. Rajput senas in Bhojpur have included Ganga Sena and Kunwar Sena, the Brahmarishi Sena was a Bhumihar sena.

12. A Bhumihar population of approximately 8000.

13. Bhumihars and Rajputs, with roughly the same social status and economic power have always had an antagonistic relationship in this district as well as in the rest of Bihar, reflecting their struggle for social superiority and political control. During the course of my field-work, it was often pointed out that it is rare to find both castes residing in the same village.

14. While this practice is prevalent in parts of Bhojpur where the CPI(ML) is absent, a significant change can be seen in villages which are marked by their presence. While even today, the most progressive of the upper castes may at best offer a chowki to the labourers to sit on, in their own homes they do as they please.

15. There are also some members of the same castes who join/support the senas under compulsion. This usually takes the form of social pressure by the larger caste-community, often accompanied with threats of ostracism.

16. It can be counter-argued that as many as 14 of the 19 victims of the massacre belonged to dalit and other backward castes; that not only Naimuddin's but Marwari Mallah's family was also targetted – this seems to be the common fate of all leading cadres of such a political movement at the local level. The capturing of the Karbala and Imambada lands while significant is not special, since the landed have a tendency to capture as much land (of any type) as they can. As mentioned earlier in this paper, most of the gairmajara land in this village is also under their illegal occupation.

17. There are other JD MLAs who are known to have close links with other caste senas. For example, Raghvendra Pratap Singh, JD MLA from Barhara constituency (north Bhojpur), has a close association with the Ganga Sena.



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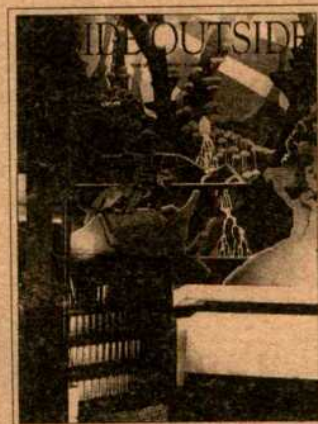
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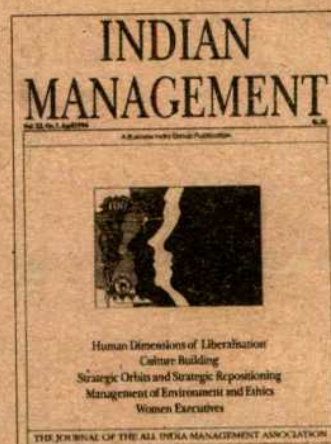
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# Books

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN CRICKETER** by Sujit Mukherjee. Ravi Dayal Publisher, New Delhi, 1996.

AMONG the more quaint versions of the colonial experience in India is one which projects cricket as an instrument of cultural imperialism. By introducing a game inextricably linked with 'laws', the colonial masters, it is said, sought to impart to the natives the virtues of structured competitiveness. This, in turn, encouraged a form of acquiescence in the status quo.

A votary of this conspiracy theory who chances on Sujit Mukherjee's very readable reminiscences as a lordly amateur is certain to discover meaning into the fact that it was one Jesuit priest – Father Cleary – who taught wide-eyed, impressionable students of St. Xavier's, Patna, both the skills and the ethos of cricket. About Father Cleary's talents both as a player and coach, Mukherjee is quite ecstatic, but the highest praise is reserved for the Jesuit Priest's ability to teach fiercely competitive students the importance of unreservedly respecting the umpire's verdict.

Mukherjee's description of events after the school team lost a crucial match thanks to a controversial umpiring decision is moving: 'Some of my team-mates wept that evening, others uttered foul swear-words out of our teachers' hearing, a few planned to murder the umpire. As I cycled back from the ground in a bunch with Father Cleary, he was already talking about the next season. That day,

I think, I grew up a little more, and not only in the cricket sense.'

The author is not exaggerating. Almost every Indian who has played the game and has come to identify with the culture associated with cricket, will have their own recollections of local heroes who proved worthy missionaries of a noble sport. What Mukherjee recounts about Patna – a relative backwater of cricket – is true for Darjeeling, Calcutta, Doon and Delhi. The culture of cricket transcends narrow geographical boundaries.

The charm of Mukherjee's cricketing autobiography lies not so much in the accounts of now-forgotten matches won, lost or drawn. The author vividly captures the conditions in which cricket struck roots in India. The descriptions of long train journeys in difficult conditions, the relative paucity of equipment and gear, treacherous pitches and the permanent scarcity of resources, strike a chord among almost everyone who has played the game for pleasure and enjoyment. If C.L.R. James' *Beyond The Boundary* captured the spirit of cricket in the West Indies in its formative years, Mukherjee's *Autobiography of an Unknown Cricketer* does likewise for India.

But there is a slight difference. James, whose interests (apart from cricket) stretched to history and politics, succeeded in locating the flamboyance of West Indian cricket in a social context. To James – Constantine, Worrel and Kanhai were not merely cricketers blessed with individual style, these styles emerged out of a social context. Mukherjee is lavish in detailing the excitement in



popularising cricket in Bihar, but he is less forthcoming about the styles of amateur cricket and their links with conditions of play.

To take a random example. Why was the appeal of cricket in Patna confined to the expatriate Bengalis, and, in the case of neighbouring Jamshedpur, to the Parsees? Was there a link, in the initial days at least, between the appreciation of cricket and relative familiarity with the English language? Why is it that the zamindari families of Bihar failed to patronise the game? And, to what extent were the trappings of the game – the fascination for the handkerchief tied around the neck, or the insistence on cap and blazer – dictated by local English influences?

Mukherjee does touch upon the English influence. In describing the atmosphere of the Patna Cricket Club, he writes: 'Playing cricket here with Englishmen was the nearest I ever got to them before they left India for ever, hence the live Englishman remains for ever in my mind associated with cricket. In later life, whenever I met an Englishman not interested in cricket, it has caused unreasonable disappointment with the man.'

Again, describing the occasional tensions involved in playing with/against the Britons with whom other social contact was negligible, he writes: 'Such instances of disharmony were not frequent enough to disrupt the general atmosphere of decorum and courtesy that pervaded these games. Playing the game was more important than winning or losing. Whatever advantages the Indians sought in such company, the British certainly came to relax and must have revealed sides of their character that were suppressed on weekdays.'

Is that why cricket proved a great leveler? Why were the underlying racial tensions of a soccer game involving India and British teams absent from cricket? And is that why the Raj has failed to become a snarl word among true cricket lovers (to be distinguished from voluble cricket enthusiasts who follow every one-day game with fanatical partisanship)?

I suspect that some future historian will use this slim volume to demonstrate the remarkable convergence of views between the 'Unknown Cricketer' and the 'Unknown Indian'. He will definitely have a point, and it is a point which Sujit Mukherjee should unreservedly uphold.

**Swapan Dasgupta**

**CHANGEL: The Biography of a Village** by Arvind N. Das. Penguin, Delhi, 1996.

CHANGEL, a non-descript village tucked away in a remote part of north Bihar, is like any other village. Some of us have known the Indian village through our personal experiences and through a mass of social science writings, the finest example of which is M.N. Srinivas' *Village Remembered*. And, more importantly, through the writings of Premchand, Phaneeshwarnath Renu, Rahi Masoom Raza and Madhukar

Singh. In the recent past, the Indian village has also come alive in the columns of newspapers and specialised magazines, thanks to a crop of journalists and writers who discovered the 'Indian village' as a mode of existence and as a source of their creativity.

Bachcha, a student of Delhi's St. Stephen's College and later a dilettante academic, discovered Changel that was his village through a chance journey. His early childhood in Changel was idyllic and romantic; the return journey an eye-opener. He saw Changel through its changing and unchanging times. Bachcha makes frequent visits to Changel, sees it through the eyes of a historian and discovers his own 'roots'. Changel symbolises Bachcha's yearnings for his roots, while at the same time highlighting his alienation.

Bachcha's preoccupation, if not obsession, with the theme of change and continuity haunts the reader. 'Changel still appears to be the archetypal "unchanging Indian village" ... but a close look reveals that Changel has changed though it has been excruciatingly slow... and only quantitative.' This is a constant refrain in Bachcha's account of his village.

The myth of an 'unchanging Indian village' stands shattered as anybody with knowledge of villages in the plains of Bihar will certify. Few people may be more aware of this reality than Changel's author, Arvind N. Das. Forget the organised peasant movements led by Swami Sahjanand Saraswati, the Communist Party of India and the Socialists. From the early 1970s when the massacre of tribals in Purnea by family members of Lakshminarain Sudhanshu, then Speaker of the Bihar Assembly, hit newspaper headlines, to Belchchi, Parasbigha, Pipra and now Bathani tola, Bihar's villages come across as a cauldron of violence. The inexorable law of change underlies this violence, whether it be of caste, class or any other hue.

It is true that despite the change, the predominant aspect of the village is its backwardness rather than development. But the continuity stops there and the process of change takes over. The pattern of land-holding has changed; the pattern of crop-sharing has changed as have the pattern of wages. But above all, what is perceptible is a change in the mode of social and cultural behaviour, the entire gamut of relationships. As Bachcha noted in Changel, the village women stopped playing sama-chakwa, a community enterprise. But not because the ponds dried up or because cinema became the main source of entertainment. I was baffled by one phenomenon in my village. Women of my mother's generation discovered they did not remember marriage songs. My grandmother had carried on the tradition and tried hard to equip her daughters-in-law but without success. There was no influence of the cinema on them. Rather, the tradition of village women gathering at a place and singing ceased with the death of community life.

Every village has its landholders and its labour which tilled the land for centuries. However, not only has the earlier

pattern of patron-client relationship undergone change, it has ruptured. The new relations are yet to take shape. The situation in the countryside therefore, is in flux. As a result, what we once saw as an organic communal entity is no more. The Indian village has broken its tenuous links with the past. It is my contention that in the village a change in the super-structure has preceded a change in the base.

My contention is backed by experience and observation, not by analytical tools of social science as in Bachcha's case. Unlike Bachcha, I did not have to discover or re-discover my village, having lived there for the better part of my life. I have been a part of it, and have witnessed its social collapse bit by bit. Yes, there were external influences that impacted on the village. But so powerful are the internal dynamics of the village that it would have changed even without external influences.

In the post-independence period, village life has come under intense influence of the nascent Indian democracy. The introduction of adult franchise, the growth of mass media, mainly radio, spread of primary education, division of land, break-up of the Hindu joint family and mass migration to cities, are some of the major influences that have been at work. Unemployment and urban influences have hastened the demise of village communal life. It has led to large scale lumpenisation tearing asunder the community life which had survived the vicissitudes of civilisations for thousand of years. The village had changed earlier too, but the pace quickened in the 1960s and '70s. Hundreds of years were telescoped in a couple of decades.

Bachcha's efforts to link the external with the internal is much too laboured. No wonder Changel's characters lack vitality, notwithstanding the author's craftsmanship. However, Mangrauliwalli, Jatta Lal and Harvansh Narayan stand out as powerful characters, made of flesh and blood. Arvind Das is right. It is for the reader to decide whether Changel is fact or fiction. Bachcha has sought to combine the two at his own peril.

Ashok K. Singh

**ECOLOGY, ACCUMULATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION – A Study of Adivasis in Bihar** by Ramesh Chandra Mishra, Durganand Sinha and John Widdup Berry. Sage, New Delhi, 1996.

THE book under review is a study in cross-cultural psychology. It undertakes a comparative study of the Birhor, Asur and Oraon tribal peoples in Bihar. The book is overburdened with data on psychology. There is virtually nothing about ecology. As such it becomes difficult to understand the processes of acculturation that the book seeks to describe. More important, what is missing from the comparative framework is the data on the psychology of the non-tribal 'development' world and the direction towards which the acculturation process moves.

Some passages in the book suggest that these tribals are being sanskritised. For instance, it is stated that: 'To fulfill the development aims, the Scheduled Castes have been provided with facilities for free education, free coaching, grants for books, and scholarships etc., and about 15% of the total vacancies in the government jobs have also been reserved for them. With these privileges, the economic status of some of the members of these castes has definitely improved, but the traditional Hindu society does not consider these advances to be important, and appears to be unwilling to grant them any special position in the social hierarchy. On the other hand, the members of Scheduled Castes who become successful tend to reject their traditional culture and caste identity in order to get absorbed in the dominant Hindu society. People who have not been able to take advantage of these privileges face various discriminatory practices of the higher caste groups. Intolerance of such discriminations has sometimes led to the voluntary mass conversions of Scheduled Caste groups into Islam or Christianity, particularly in the southern part of the country' (p. 115).

The description is not unfamiliar. This book makes an attempt to grasp the psychological dimension of sanskritization as part of the process of acculturation. The problematic, however, is the nature of integration. The different psychological indices used by the authors do not help us understand this problematic.

To start with this work does not even capture one half of the story of the tribal peoples confrontation with developmental modernity. There are a large number of tribals who continue to observe Hindu cultural practices along with their own. Most of them are poor and have to struggle for a livelihood. The problems they face, and the methods by which they try to overcome their handicaps are not intelligible through the psychological tools used by the authors.

Instead, what is perhaps needed is a study of their dreams and how they relate to their everyday life. This study only focuses on the psychological preparedness and willingness to deal with the new life situations where the modern and the tribal world-view stand opposed to one another.

Savyasaachi

**EVERYBODY LOVES A GOOD DROUGHT: Stories from India's Poorest Districts** by P. Sainath. Penguin, New Delhi, 1997.

'DEVELOPMENT' is the strategy of evasion. When you can't give people land reform, give them hybrid cows. When you can't send the children to school, try non-formal education. When you can't provide basic health to people, talk of health insurance. Can't give them jobs? Not to worry. Just redefine the words "employment opportunities". Don't want to do away with using children as a form of slave labour. Never mind. Talk of "improving the conditions of child

labour". It sounds good. You can even make money out of it.'

Angry, exasperated, or just cynical? Neither, really. After all, how much faith can one have in the pronouncements of a government which re-arranges poverty statistics according to its political convenience. Just before the 1996 elections, the Planning Commission announced that the percentage of people below the poverty line had come down to 19. A few months earlier, at the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development, the figure was 39 per cent. If the former figure was directed at the aid-givers, greater poverty means higher aid flow. And now, the recently constituted Planning Commission has once again reverted to 39 per cent. Differing figures from the same expert source. And both Commissions even have an overlapping membership. This jugglery generated little comment in our media.

Three years ago, P. Sainath, one-time Deputy Editor of *Blitz* was awarded a Times Fellowship to look at poverty as a process. In itself, this was unusual. Our media is not particularly known to support such ventures, particularly one that intended to go beyond the episodic coverage of grassroots development processes.

What followed was unusual. For 85 weeks, the back-page of the *Times of India* carried despatches from the field: from back-of-beyond districts like Gadda, Palamau, Kalahandi, Koraput, Nuapada, Malkangiri, Jhabua, Sarguja, Ramnathpuram and Pudukkottai. Not quite the places that make news, even on the back pages of 'national' dailies. More 'shocking', the dramatis personae were not the politicians—the MLAs, MPs and ministers who constitute 'news' for our media—but ordinary people, living their ordinary lives, facing ordinary problems.

The Times may well have set a record for the longest running weekly column of reportage. In bringing out a selection of these despatches, held together by brief editorial comments, the Publisher too deserves kudos. Years after Kusum Nair's *Blossoms in the Dust*, we once again have reports from India's forgotten districts, about its forgotten people. Together they bring to surface a reality that not just our chattering classes, but even our concerned and radical intelligentsia all too often miss.

The stories are a damning indictment of our glorious history of development, in particular of the new economic policy. All the excitement about the dramatic break with our 'socialistic' past—shared among other by the global experts, our corporate bosses, or those who were taken in by the spectacular growth of our middle class market—is shattered once we enter the field. We learn that 'drought is, beyond question, among the most serious problems this country faces. Drought relief, almost equally beyond question, is rural India's biggest growth industry.' In 1994-95 alone, Maharashtra spent over Rs 1170 crores on emergency measures combating drought and on other water related problems. This was more than the combined profits after tax of the country's leading companies. Just one drought

project in Orissa, inaugurated by Narasimha Rao, involved an expenditure of Rs 4557 crores over six years. We also learn that once a block or a district is declared 'drought prone' it attracts a phalanx of schemes. And notwithstanding our spectacular development, the number of drought prone area project (DPAP) blocks in the country has continued to grow.

Take Kalahandi. The year: 1985. The story: drought and famine. The trigger: the sale of 14 year old Banita Punji to the old and nearly blind Bidya Podh, that too by her aunt, Phanas Punji. Rajiv Gandhi was horrified. The media descended in hordes. So did the VIPs. With them came money, schemes, roads, even telephones. Ten years down the line, little has changed. Once again we are being subjected to heart-rending stories of famines and forcible sales of children. Banita Punji is still married to Bidya Podh. She, in fact, supports him and their three children. Both she and her aunt, good friends, work at the local balwadi at lower than the legal minimum wage.

More revealing is the data on rainfall. In 1985-86, Kalahandi's average rainfall was 1250 mm, well above the all-India average. Its food production per capita was more than both Orissa and India as a whole. It is interesting to note that it was Kalahandi that fed Bengal during the 1943 famine. Sainath draws our attention to the less exciting but more crucial processes that cause deprivation and famine, not just deficient rainfall. He talks about the decay of the traditional irrigation systems; of trade and usury; of the tying down of land, labour and produce to the trader-moneylender combine; of deforestation; of development induced displacement; of non-payment of minimum wages; of the takeover of the commons. It is these that make Kalahandi a major site of outmigration. Obviously, if you cannot survive where you live, you move.

Shift to Gumla where for years the army has been running an unofficial firing range. Every time the army decides to test its artillery, thousands of terrified tribals are forced to pick up their belongings and run to the nearby forests for safety. At the end of the day they are paid a princely sum of Rs 1.50 as compensation. And now the army is proposing to formalise this arrangement by setting up the Netarhat firing range, in the process acquiring 1,62,000 acres and displacing thousands of tribals. Balliapal in Orissa made news because local resistance forced the army to shelve its plans. The Gumla tribals do not. They, like the millions of other victims of development induced displacement, are only necessary sacrificial offerings at the altar of development.

Sainath also introduces us to the *koilawallas* of Gadda. They push over 250 kg of coal on their one-pedal cycles some 60 km to earn Rs 12 a day. Of course, our planners now propose to classify this activity as illegal. Or the tribal women who carry heavy head-loads of firewood, guaranteed to give cervical spondylitis, and earn a piggardly Rs 8. The long trudge for drinking water, the non-functionary schools and PHCs, the sorry state of our public distribution system, the



transfer of bamboo from poor tribals to paper factories – these stories of how the poor scrimp, save, forage, gather, steal and worse, all as part of their survival strategies, rarely make news.

Of course, not all stories are so depressing. Sainath's interview with Jagdishwar Jeet Singh, 'popular' in the late '70s as the 'maneater from Manatu' is a classic. Way back in 1978, I remember seeing a documentary about this gentleman. Even the BBC featured this infamous landlord of Palamau, holder of the world record for the largest number of bonded labour cases brought against a single person. Today, as a milk-seller, he is a pale shadow of his former self, more akin to the 19th century Bengali landlord gone to seed. Media exposure, changing times, an active administration and 'actions' by local Naxalites combined to break his hold over the area.

Avoid reading this book at one sitting: it could get too much. True, there are the occasional success stories – the women of Pudukkottai, the concerned bureaucrat, the good NGO, or the honest politician. But these are few and far between. The dominant image is of a smug and complacent elite and a media that thrives on the sensational and episodic. Evidently, so argues Sainath, our development interventions, even when well meant, often result in making life on the margins that much more difficult.

You do not have to agree with all of Sainath's analysis. He also retains a somewhat simplistic faith in old left-wing programmes such as land reforms. But there is no denying his ability to get under the skin, to force us to confront our inanities, and sometimes even face up to the lies we speak and live.

Harsh Sethi

**SAHAJANAND ON AGRICULTURAL LABOUR  
AND THE RURAL POOR** edited and translated by  
Walter Hauser. Manohar, New Delhi, 1994.

**SWAMI SAHAJANAND AND THE PEASANTS OF  
JHARKHAND: A View from 1941** edited and trans-  
lated by Walter Hauser. Manohar, New Delhi, 1995.

THE remarkable shifts in Sahajanand's ideological affiliations and programmatic commitments and his indelible role in the public arena has encouraged a considerable number of researches on his life and activities. At the same time, the sheer range of his engagements in different phases of his life (from a caste politician, he moved to be the founder of the Kisan Sabha in Bihar and the All India Kisan Sabha, and subsequently emerged as an undisputed peasant leader with professed leftist goals), has left crucial gaps leading to contentions in academic assessments. It is the second phase of Sahajanand's career, when he was closely connected with the peasant movement of the 1930s and was in fact its prime organizer and principal ideologue, that has

evoked maximum controversy among historians of modern Indian agrarian history. Did the Kisan Sabha represent poor farmers and landless labourers? Could it address the specific problems of tribals? It is in this context that we can appreciate the relevance of the two political tracts, *Khet Mazdoor* and *Jharkhand ke Kisan* (the English titles are mentioned above) written by Sahajanand and edited and translated by Professor Walter Hauser. These books, Hauser rightly points out, 'inform us of the thought and mind of one of the leading peasant activists of his day.' (*Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor*, p. 64)

Hauser is not unaware of the divergence of opinions regarding Sahajanand. In the editorial introduction to *Khet Mazdoor* he writes: 'It is presumed that he (Sahajanand) was essentially representing the interests of the well-to-do, or at best middle peasants.... But these are perceptions which dramatically undervalue the mind and activism of an exceedingly complex man....' (*Agricultural Labour*, p. xiv-xv) The two tracts, unpublished earlier, clearly show that Sahajanand did not restrict himself to protecting the interests of peasants with tenancy rights; rather he had systematically moved 'in the direction of an activism representing the marginal poor, whether peasants or landless agricultural laborers....' (*Agricultural Labour*, p. xv-xvi)

Sahajanand argues that the agricultural labourers such as 'the herdsmen, ploughmen, and others who directly work the land' (*Agricultural Labour*, p. 1) not only constituted the largest majority among the agrarian classes but also served as the very foundation of the agrarian structure. Hence no substantial change in agrarian relations was possible without addressing the problem of their exploitation. Sahajanand was convinced that a fundamental change in agrarian relations could be brought about only by a united front comprising of these agricultural labourers and the poor peasants. This tract elaborates Sahajanand's vision of a united front. At the same time it betrays the tension inhering in the process of coordinating the interests of the agricultural labourers and the peasants.

Sahajanand argued that it was futile to organize a movement only of agricultural labourers. Unlike factory workers, they lacked revolutionary potential. Materially they clung on to their paltry belongings, and their differing caste and religious affiliations left them a divided lot. In the agrarian sector they had to contend with an array of exploiters which included the zamindars, the sahukars and the poor peasants. Their agitation against the poor and marginal peasants, who also employed them, would not yield any relief since the latter themselves suffered at the hands of the zamindars and the money lenders. Such internecine struggle could only jeopardize the scope of a joint effort by classes whose interests were similar. There was no significant financial difference, Sahajanand argued, 'between the conditions of the real kisans whom we call poor or middle kisans and the condition of 98 per cent of agricultural labourers.' (*Agricultural Labour*, pp. 61-62) As a matter of fact the class

of agricultural labourers was not a 'fixed one'. It comprised of members from all castes, particularly from the class of poor peasants who had lost their land to the zamindars and money lenders. The problem of agricultural labour were thus primarily economic, and concerned people of all castes and religious groups.

Sahajanand could not, however, overlook the conflict between the agricultural labourers and the poor peasants. He confessed that whereas it was essential to keep 'the agricultural labourers and kisans within a single peasant organization, i.e., the Kisan Sabha', it was equally necessary to find 'ways to prevent their exploitation by the kisans....' (Agricultural Labour, p. 113) He urged the poor peasants to financially help the former and to treat them 'on the basis of equality and brotherhood' (Agricultural Labour, p. 93). Nevertheless he was loathe to drive a permanent wedge between the two classes. The fundamental problems of agricultural labourers, such as that of unemployment, inadequate wages and landlessness could be solved only by a united struggle of the people. The objective would be to force the government to create job opportunities and, more importantly, 'to dispossess those zamindars from all their zirat and bakasht lands who are not dependent on cultivation.'

Unlike the Khet Mazdoor tract with its focus on the class exploitation of agricultural labourers (replete with references to the Soviet experience) in *Jharkhand ke Kisan* Sahajanand emphasizes the exploitation of the Adivasi 'cultural and physical environment' (*Swami Sahajanand and the Peasants of Jharkhand*, p. 10) by non-Adivasi outsiders. His motivation to begin another tract, only three months after the completion of Khet Mazdoor, was because as an activist he was clear that no agrarian movement could be launched in a region unless one was acquainted with the specific needs of the people, their condition of existence, their exploitation and misery. Accordingly, Sahajanand deals with themes such as the spatial location and physical configuration of the land which accounted for its uniqueness, relative isolation and its richness in minerals and forest produce; the diversity of languages and culture of its inhabitants (the Adivasis), their land system, village society, and community life; the educational and developmental backwardness of the region and the exploitation of Adivasis by jagirdars, zamindars and sahuks; the rarely comprehensible land tenure system, tenancy regulations, and the legal system, and a betrayal of the people by the government and the Biharis. In order to emphasize the 'open loot', Sahajanand repeatedly drew a parallel between Jharkhand and Viharkhand, i.e., the rest of the state of Bihar.

It may be noted that Sahajanand saw the 'tribals' as the 'original inhabitants' of Jharkhand, and therefore primarily employs the term 'Adivasis' when referring to them. He saw them as true kisans (*pakke kisans*) since they loved their land as much as they loved their jungle and could not

'live without these two central elements of their lives' (Peasants of Jharkhand, p. 37). (Interestingly, Sahajanand suggests that the Adivasis, unless they were converted, were all Hindus.) Sahajanand pointedly contrasts the helplessness and exploitation of the kisans with their potential for positive change. What had betrayed the Adivasis, in his opinion, was the middle class affiliations of their leaders, and the infiltration of non-Adivasis into the leadership. 'If organized on the basis of their class interest,' Sahajanand suggests, 'they (the kisans) can become a powerful force whom no one can crush' (Peasants of Jharkhand, p. 37).

As Hauser correctly points out, this tract should not be read as a history of Jharkhand or as an examination of land systems, forest policies and so on. Rather, its importance lies in that it reflects the impressions of one of the most active peasant leaders of Bihar on issues concerning the people of Jharkhand. When one remembers that most accounts of Jharkhand have survived primarily in the records of colonial administrators and ethnographers (S.C. Roy's writings being an exception), the historical significance of the tract is reinforced.

Hauser has understandably decided not to rewrite or revise Sahajanand's accounts of the khet mazdoor or the Adivasis of Jharkhand; nor is he interested in checking their historical accuracy. He has provided an editorial endnote at the end of every chapter in order to 'amplify, clarify and provide bibliographic definition to Sahajanand's text' (Peasants of Jharkhand, p. 77), an editor's glossary with a brief introduction, and most importantly the original Hindi text. The editorial notes, which reconstruct the historical context and ideological milieu in which Sahajanand marshalled his thoughts, raise some new problems in historiography. Hauser seems to posit a direct correspondence between Sahajanand's ideas and the prevailing political and material situation. This encourages Hauser to constantly stress the applicability of Sahajanand's concepts to the 1980s and 1990s. Sahajanand's historical role can be assessed even without insisting on his relevance to recent times. Some of the notes are too detailed and appear irrelevant. For example, why is it necessary to discuss Krishna Ballabh Sahay's daily visits to Palamau during the famine of the mid-1960s as an endnote to Sahajanand's comment on the barrenness of the Palamau district of Chotanagpur! (Peasants of Jharkhand, p. 24-25). A final comment on a minor factual error: the Adivasi Mahasabha did not emerge out of the Unnati Samaj in 1938 as Hauser seems to suggest (Peasants of Jharkhand, p. 9); both arose as independent organizations. At a time when the attention of historians is focused around the history of identities, the publication of these two political tracts by one of our most important peasant leaders, assumes relevance. For any serious scholar of peasant history, these books provide useful reference.

Sangeeta Dasgupta  
Padmanabh Samarendra

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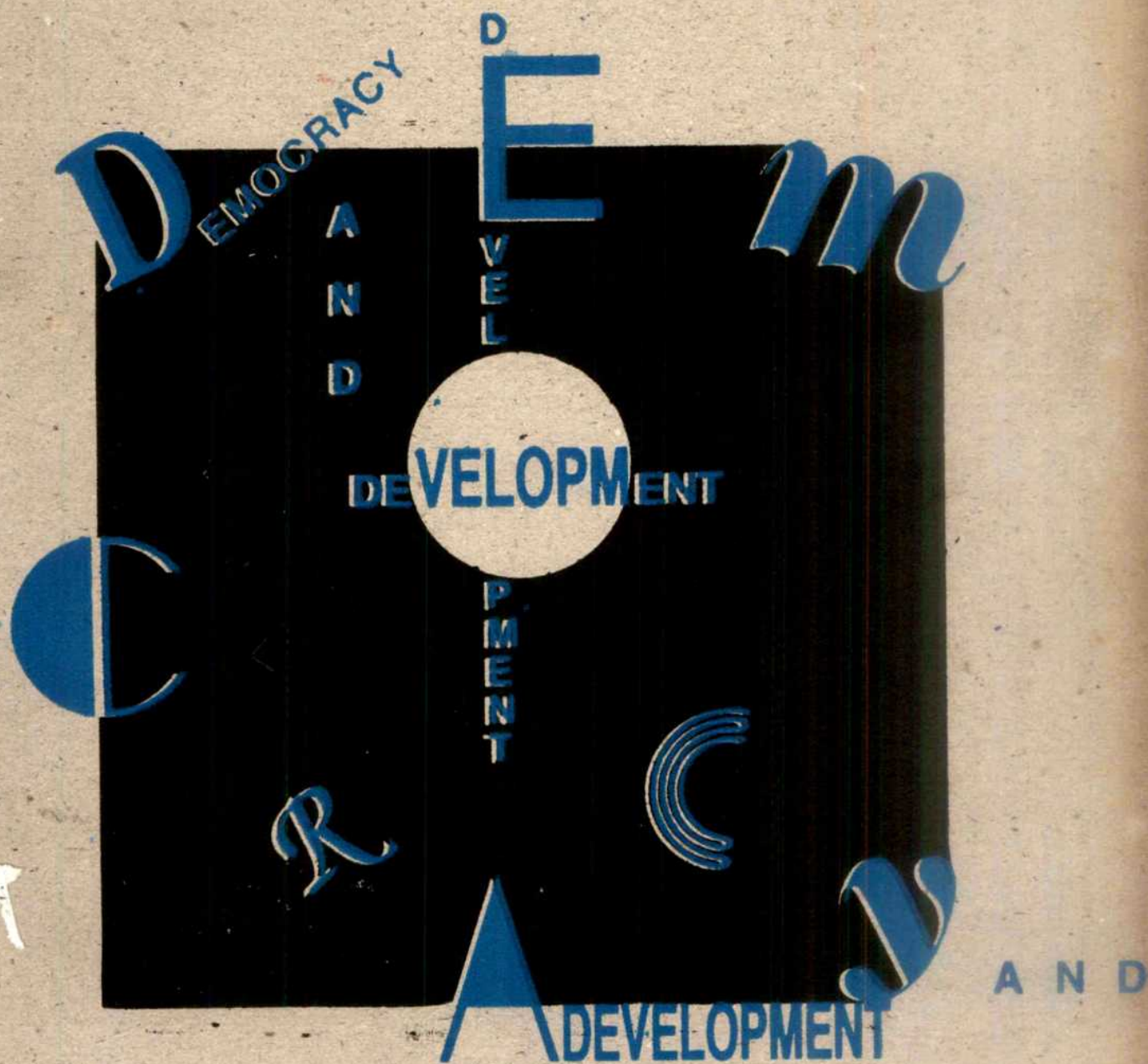
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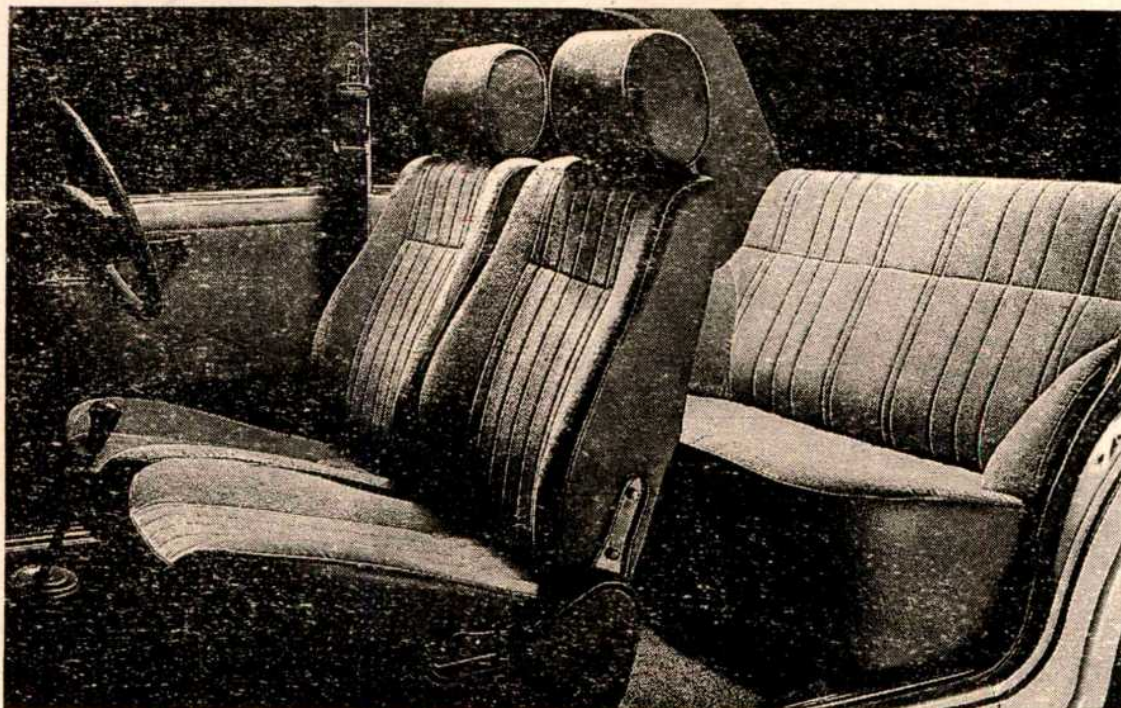
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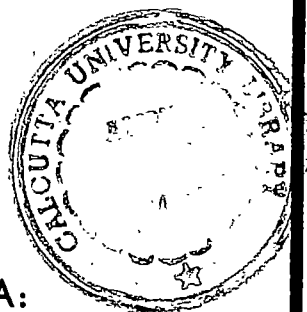
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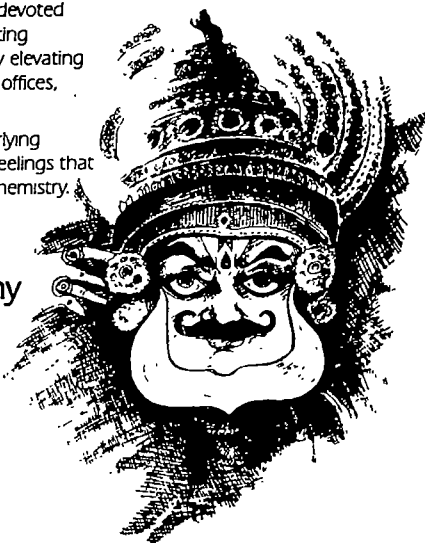
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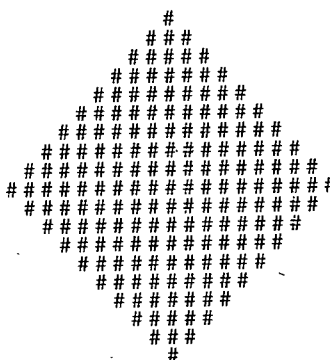
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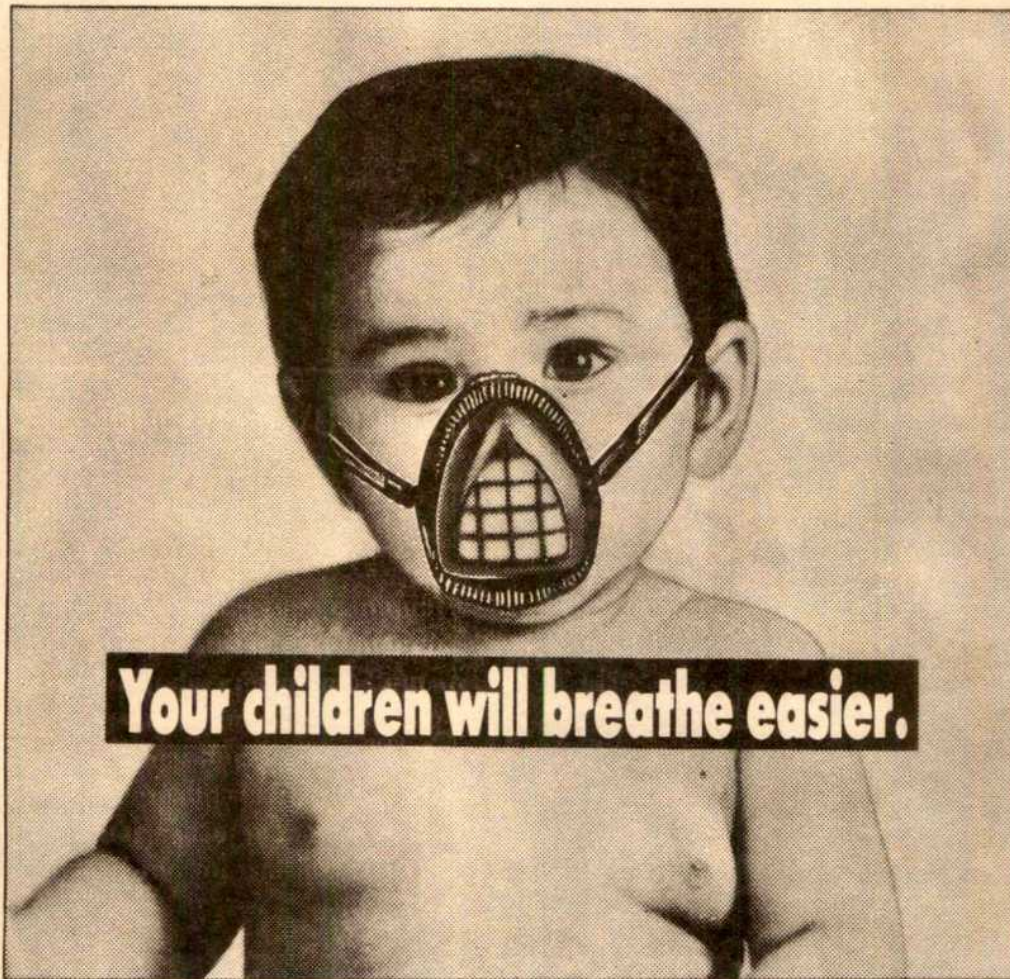


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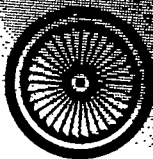
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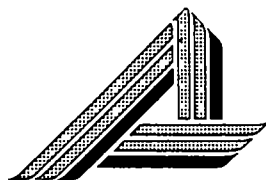
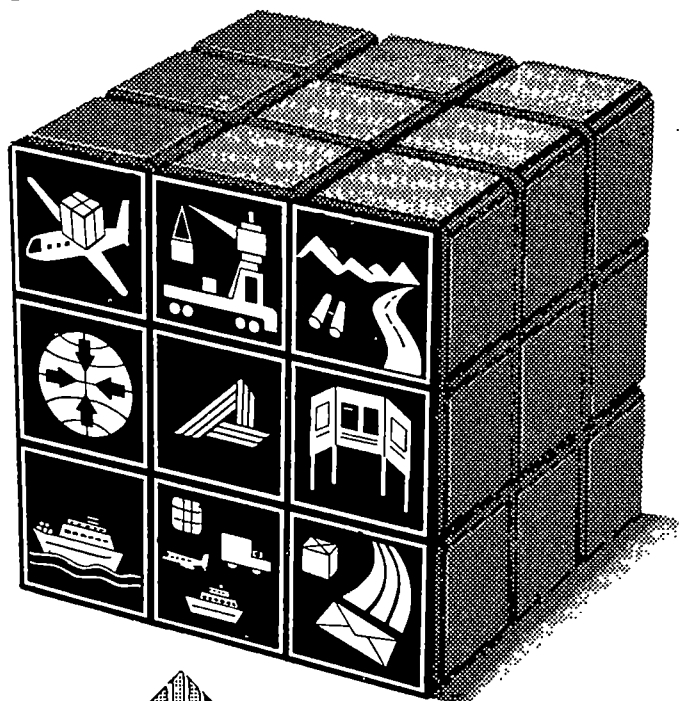
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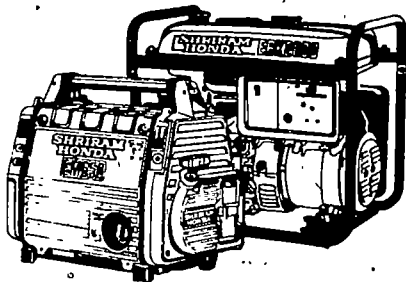
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**Sanjoy Hazarika**, journalist, Delhi
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# The problem

DEVELOPMENT and democracy were arguably integral and even non-negotiable parts of the modernizing project of the Indian state at independence, though the relationship between them could be said to have been ambivalent. As the strategy of imitatively traversing a path rehearsed and charted elsewhere, development was unproblematically assumed to encompass not only an industrial economy, but also a democratic polity, and a programme of social transformation. Thus comprehensively defined, the project of development was inspired by the happy if naive image of a successful transition – institutional and ideological – from tradition to modernity, eventually mirroring the western experience. It was never in doubt that the underlying conceptions of both development and democracy were fairly straightforward derivatives of the regnant view of history as western genealogy, despite the addition of some indigenous ingredients supplied by the doctrines of the socialistic mixed economy, non-alignment in foreign policy, a multi-theocratic view of secularism, and other such now largely discredited products of the native genius.

In large part, the failed aspects of both these experiments – the developmental and the democratic – are attributable to their thoughtlessly derivative character. The developmental orthodoxy, which interpreted it purely in terms of quantifiable measures of economic growth, was manifesting its limitations even before this meaning of development came everywhere to be challenged and discredited. Democracy, likewise, defined exclusively in terms of parliamentary representative institutions – chosen, as Nehru put it, out of the habit of seeing those institutions work well in their native Westminster habitat – was severely limited in its conceptualization, with little or no attention paid to the conditions in which it could best be expected to flourish. At least one important contradiction floated to the surface as the full implications of majoritarian electoral politics were realized, showing that the borrowed representative institutions were incapable of fulfilling the requirements of a multicultural and multi-religious society in a manner that is just and democratic in substance, rather than merely in form. The mismatches that emerged were thus many and varied: for instance, that between economic design and political reality or between political institutions and cultural practices, and so on.

Meanwhile, as the logic of democratic political institutions began increasingly to come into conflict with the state's firm direction of the development process, this generated problems of more or less skilful political management, and also gave rise to a cynically manipulative discourse of both development and democracy, rendering these goals at best vacuous, and at worst contradictory. The former gave rise, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, to such

questions as: Is democracy appropriate for developing societies? Does the existence of democratic institutions make the task of development more difficult by allowing the unrestricted expression of diverse interests and claims on scarce national resources? This argument, offered as crisis-management analysis by the American social science establishment of the time, was also offered as an explanation for the career of Indian democracy by scholars in the 1980s. It today underlies the offer of East Asian exemplars commended to India.

Appropriately, however, the question of democratic participation in relation to development strategy, and the confrontation between these, came to be raised at the level of political practice rather than scholarly discourse. Technocratic developmental policies were challenged not by arguments of democracy *qua* democracy, but by mounting protest on questions of survival, against the displacement and alienation – by development projects – of people from their habitats, cultures and ways of life. Thus, the earlier question of whether democracy is appropriate for developing societies gave way, in the 1990s, to a new question, that of the appropriateness of this model of development, perceived to be at once economically inequitable, environmentally unsustainable and politically less than democratic in its denial of the rights of equal citizenship.

Today, the question of whether democracy and development are irretrievably opposed or harmoniously compatible takes many forms, of which at least the following two have been active in recent years. The first, advanced by the proponents of sustainable development, argues emphatically that the abandonment of the conventional path of development is a necessary precondition for the achievement of anything like genuine democracy. The second, from the advocates of globalization, advances a development-friendly definition of democracy which is sanitised of all political connotations to mean only administrative accountability, transparency, control over corruption, such that democracy is effectively substituted by that dubious term, 'good governance'. This neutered definition of democracy is, to a not insignificant extent, encouraged by the East Asian lesson which decrees that the project of democracy can, for the time being, be put on the backburner while soft authoritarianism helps beget economic development.

The challenge to the idea that development must everywhere follow a more or less invariant pattern has come from unexpected sources. One of these attaches importance to culture as the hidden variable in both democratic and developmental experience. Gunnar Myrdal's gentle suggestion in *Asian Drama*, that cultural factors impacted economic development in a variety of ways has received a fresh lease of life in the aftermath of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis



from Samuel Huntington's new avatar. Now, Francis Fukuyama argues that the differences between the Japanese and Chinese economies is, in no small measure, due to cultural attributes, in particular family structure and family values. Thus, low-trust societies like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Italy and France are distinguished from high-trust societies like Japan, Germany and the United States, to explain the differences in their economic performance.

The path, currently and rather ambivalently being charted by India, reflects some of the confusions and contradictions of this welter of explanations and prognoses. Among these contradictions is one between the universalizing imperative of globalization and the pressures for decentralization and local-level democracy. Above all, there is the concern that while development and democracy were intended to be empowering, they have tended instead to reproduce social and economic inequalities which have distorted the outcomes of development as well as the promise of democracy.

In some sense, the distortions of democratic politics are also just as much the distortions of the process of development, and as such are barely distinguishable from each other. There is also an astonishing similarity between those who have benefited from, and those who have been marginalized by, these parallel processes. Neither democracy nor development have come much closer to achieving the ideals that ostensibly informed them – of genuine equality and distributive justice. This is not terribly surprising if we observe that democratic politics in India has more frequently led to the articulation of identities rather than interests. The politics of interest can be of two kinds: first, that presupposed by liberal ideology which has, at its core, the image of the individual citizen as a rational utility-maximizer; and the second, that suggested by socialist ideology which envisages a radical politics of collective action, whether of working class or peasant struggles. These have been relatively minor players in the otherwise dramatic saga of democratic politics in India. The distortions created or reinforced by the process of development have, in no small measure, fed into these distortions of the democratic process.

In relation to development, a certain continuity in policy is clearly discernible from the '50s to the '90s. In the earlier period, the programmes of community development and cooperativization were formulated without any serious intentions of disturbing the rural power structure. The imperatives of 'democratic', read electoral, politics provide at least some clues to how these half-hearted efforts were effectively subverted in practice. Today, the reluctance to squarely and effectively address the food scarcity in Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput districts of Orissa – through a strategy that goes to the roots of structural back-

wardness, rather than through the outlay of vast sums of easily appropriated relief money – points to a similar malaise. The political voicelessness of the landless is, in either case, the cause and the explanation for their neglect.

It appears strange that though the rent-seeking proclivities of the development bureaucracy were fairly early recognized as an impediment to the efficacy of development programmes, the obverse was not seen to be true till much later: viz., the need for decentralized local-level determination of development priorities and their implementation through local-level institutions. In Indian administrative and political experience the tensions between development and democracy have for long been manifest at several levels, of which we may identify three for special consideration: (i) the formulation of development policy and the setting of development priorities; (ii) the outcome-biases of development; and (iii) the discourses of development and democracy.

It is no secret that the process of planning for development has been overwhelmingly dominated by experts and technocrats. It was not, however, always so. Of the early stalwarts of Indian planning, barely a handful were even economists: it was their political convictions and their predisposition to a way of organizing economy and society (today neatly encapsulated in the catch-all phrase 'Nehruvian') that gave them their positions of pre-eminence in charting out the path of development. Under Indira Gandhi, this changed somewhat, as the Plans became increasingly reflective of the election manifesto of the Congress Party. Over the years, however, planning for development has become the preserve of technical experts and retired civil servants, with economists (but notoriously few other social scientists) invariably in the drivers seat. Thus, quite in keeping with the interpretation of development as economic growth, it is economic evaluation in the choice, design and implementation of policy that has enjoyed priority over the question of policy appropriateness which ideally should take into account cultural and social factors, provide space for debate on the normative aspects of policy and, above all, for democratic negotiation.

While parliamentary impact on policy-making has been noticeably weak, there has also been no attempt to take into account the felt needs of the people to be affected by particular development projects. It has become fashionable, even in World Bank documents, to insist on popular participation (through referenda, for example) as a critical criterion for determining the location of development projects and the setting of local development agendas. In India, even as the institutionalization of panchayati raj awaits realization, there is a gargantuan history – which will be hard to wish away or dismiss – of central control over development. Not for nothing have the states of the union been

lamenting that half the plan assistance they receive for rural development is in the form of central and centrally sponsored schemes and therefore reflective of, at best, the distant uniformizing perspective of New Delhi and, at worst, of the rich electoral harvest promised by timely welfare schemes. Not for nothing, also, were Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi's pronouncements on decentralization interpreted as red herrings, as clever political strategy to reach out to the local level over the heads of hostile political formations in power in various state capitals. Meanwhile, the obstacles—social, political, administrative and economic—to any real institutionalization of democracy at the local level remain formidable, though such institutionalization may well be a necessary precondition for genuinely participatory development.

The most favoured establishment explanation for where we went wrong in our development planning is that faulty implementation, rather than flaws in policy, is to be blamed for the failures. Faulty implementation, in turn, is usually seen to be a function of leakages, rent-seeking activities, and the urban middle class bias and order-orientation of the bureaucracy, famously described as a 'blunt instrument' for the performance of its post-independence welfare and development functions. Administrative failure apart, it is obvious that the political uses of development projects are virtually limitless as the announcement of a project or a welfare scheme can easily be made to appear a form of personal largesse from influential leaders.

Secondly, it has become increasingly apparent in recent years that development projects do not satisfy their chief justificatory principle, viz. the common good or the welfare of all. Take the example of irrigation systems, which everywhere are notoriously political. Their dramatic impact and high visibility is extremely useful for politicians (as at least one splendid study of Nasser's politics and the Aswan Dam in Egypt has shown); they yield obvious advantages to contractors and engineers; and, above all, development administrators see in them opportunities for control and discipline. It is hardly surprising that, though the Sardar Sarovar Dam is ostensibly intended to benefit the drought-prone regions of Kutch and Saurashtra, its most vocal defenders are to be found in the Gujarat Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which has cheerfully subsidized political mobilizations in favour of the dam.

Irrigation systems have also tended to reinforce inequities, as their benefits are invariably reaped by the wealthier and more powerful farmers, who are better able to manipulate regular and plentiful access to canal water, and can therefore more successfully plan their crops and command better inputs. In turn, the green revolution strategy has meant that resources have been disproportionately diverted to irrigated areas in the name of agricultural growth and the imperative of achieving self-sufficiency in foodgrain production, and to the complete neglect of rainfed agriculture which accounts for seventy per cent of cultivable land,

but contributes a meagre thirty per cent of value added in the agricultural sector. It is not accidental, either, that the already better endowed regions of the country have prospered as a result of scarce resources being used to maximize their potential, while many others have registered declines. The relationship between poverty and such regional imbalances in development is too well-known to be laboured, as indeed is the corruption of the irrigation bureaucracy which, by its control over the tendering of contracts and by manipulating water deliveries, manages to raise funds, apparently to pay for lucrative postings!

Finally, it is instructive to note the multifarious uses of the discourses of both development and democracy. In post-independence India, development has acquired the status of an article of faith; rather like arguments of national interest and national security, and its purposes and consequences alike are placed outside the domain of that which can be legitimately questioned or challenged. The ideological neutrality of national security is requisitioned by development projects, as both come to be seen as aspects of the paternalist-protector state. It is hardly surprising that workers demanding better working conditions and wages on the site of the Sardar Sarovar Dam have been booked on charges of sedition and anti-national activities.

The argument of national interest fluently translates into the argument of public purpose which enables the state to ask sections of its citizenry to sacrifice some of their rights in order that 'society as a whole' may benefit. The decision as to what legitimately constitutes public purpose is not, however, open to discussion or participation. Thus, the public purpose argument is found to be equally serviceable in justifying the expropriation of tribal persons from their land as it is for the imposition of the Official Secrets Act, for reasons of state, of course.

The contours of the contemporary debate remain amorphous, as even the terms of the debate are unclear. At one level, we are confronted with questions of the following normative and strategic orders: are democracy and development irretrievably opposed and contradictory? Should democracy be privileged over development or *vice versa*? Is it necessary or desirable or even possible to discuss the relationship between development and democracy to the exclusion of other crucial variables such as ethnicity or market or state? At quite another level the conventional definitions of the concepts of development and democracy are being interrogated, yielding an altogether different crop of questions, such as: what kind of democratic institutions are required or entailed by strategies of sustainable development? Can the concepts of democracy and development be invested with new meanings to render them more sensitive to the needs of the marginalised, and how do we find appropriate institutional expression for these new meanings and sensitivities?

NIRAJA GOPAL JAYAL

# The freedom of choice

SIR ISAIAH BERLIN

*In conversation with Jyotirmaya Sharma, recorded at All Soul's College, Oxford on 22 April 1996.*

FOR Isaiah Berlin, the questions of democracy and development would properly belong to a realm of ethics. This entails a systematic examination of relations among human beings, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another, and the constellation of values that human beings hold dear in pursuing ends in life, emerge from.

What circumscribes this ethical view is by now a familiar part of Berlin's entire philosophy. It is the proposition that values are not always commensurable, especially if these values are formulated as supreme or absolute values. That is why the question of basic liberty is of paramount importance in Berlin's scheme of things.

If this is Berlin's point of departure, then what he has to say about democracy and development becomes much more intelligible.

Firstly, there are those who argue that a majority of the models of development are based on 18th century Enlightenment ideas of progress. Their dissatisfaction with notions of development manifest in critiques of scientism and of technology. These critiques often suggest a return to our pre-modern – which for many amounts to non-western, non-technological – pasts where we would find less violent, less oppressive models of development.

Further, strong and persuasive arguments have been extended to argue that so powerful and pernicious are the effects of western thought that our own indigenous ways of thinking, our own systems of knowledge have been usurped by this all embracing virus of Eurocentrism. We have all ended up as helpless victims of the power of western

knowledge. Therefore, if alternate ways of development are to be explored, then this is possible only after the yoke of western or Eurocentric knowledge is thrown away.

On the basis of Berlin's philosophy, it is possible to speculate a set of responses to these arguments. At the outset, there is no going back into the realms of the past. Of course, we can endlessly argue that a certain age or time in the past was much more desirable or more humane. But there is no actual return to the past possible, except in the form of a charade, a simulation or simply play-acting of one sort or the other. Human beings must always pay a price for being around.

It is not that problems, whether these are of hunger or poverty or tyranny, do not have solutions. But every solution, Berlin suggests, breeds its own needs and new problems. A society which accepts only one single goal and not a diversity of goals, reduces all problems to an argument that hinges on finding technological solutions. 'That is a society in which the inner life of man, the moral and spiritual and aesthetic imagination no longer speaks at all.'

There is therefore, a rather thin line that divides those who are willing to sacrifice thousands or millions of human beings in the name of progress, development, flag, country or race, and those who think they have found the right answers, those who find themselves face to face with some or the other notion of absolute truth. Both these sets of people see themselves as saviours of humankind. They have a similar urge to guide human beings towards a destiny which they alone have an insight into. Both share the same quality of intolerance towards the needs and aspirations of others.

1. Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* edited by Henry Hardy. London, John Murray, 1991, p. 15.

There is not much to choose between the tyrant and the prophet.

In the end there is no Plato-like philosopher who can tell us how to live or what is the best course we should follow to our eternal good and timeless benefit. Rather, human beings choose, and even if the choice entails unfreedom, it is still a choice. There is no place in Berlin's philosophy for any talk about impersonal forces whether natural or man-made. What is imperative is to communicate with other human beings: Others may live in the light of values widely different from one's own, but we can still recognize them as values, ends of life. A realization of this may help us grasp how one might be a full human being.

EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW:

*On freedom and the centrality of choice*

People choose because they are impelled to choose. What impels them, there is no telling. There is no clear answer to that. I choose that I choose because I suddenly feel like it, or something stimulates me, or somebody does something which delights me or horrifies me, or somebody has done something which amuses me or pleases me; or someone comes to see me, like you, and I choose to reply to your questions because I said I would and I have no objection to it. There is no possible single answer to that.

The only thing I want to say is that as I am not a determinist, I do think that choice is free. I mean, in other words, the famous problem of free choice. That means, I do not think that you can say that I choose because I am caused to choose by whatever it may be. Maybe I am. But it seems I do not know it. If I were, if I believed in determinism, which for all I know may be true, except that there is no reason for it, no evidence of it. If I think determinism were true, then, I think we would have to radically alter our moral language. That is my main reason for saying that there is free will. Free will, free choice are the same to me.

But at this point, I would like to say something that needs to be said. The question of liberty. One has to say there are two kinds of liberty, not only negative and positive, I don't mean that. There is basic liberty, which is not political or moral. Just liberty of doing or not doing. Being or not being. Unless people can either act or fail to act deliberately, they are not human beings: they are automatons. But there is a different sense of liberty, political liberty, which means simply the possibility of going along a particular path, choosing some local path, and not going along some path where there is an obstacle. These two senses of liberty are not the same. But the basic sense, which is not political, but is part of the definition of what it is to be human is to say that unless you can either act or not act, either lift your little finger or fail to lift it: unless that is possible you cannot be described as fully human. You then begin to approach the condition of an animal, or an object. So long as I am alive,

so long as I have ordinary human attributes, I am capable of thinking, I am capable of feeling emotion, I am capable of willing, so long as that goes on there is no situation in which an act of mine forecloses all future possibilities of exercising free will or choosing.

Actually, if I choose unfreedom, there is a choice. I can at any moment alter my choice. I can choose to be a slave, but I can certainly choose not to be a slave and rebel: at the moment of rebellion I am no longer content to remain a slave.

*On the incompatibility of certain values and the question of judgement about values*

Our lives are lived in a horizon of values, a kind of constellation of values, which we partly inherit, partly they are part of the education, of the tradition in which we are born. That is how we begin. And there are certain values which are communicated to us by our parents, our teachers, our society, and then we can think of different ones ourselves, or we can reject them, although we are taught to accept them. But if you say how do we come by our initial values, then we must ask how do we come by language? How do we come by thought?

We are born with something of this sort. It is part of a stream of which we are drops. But we can, of course, reject it. I am brought up to respect, say, the German state, and I reject it in favour of something more democratic. I am brought up to believe what my nurse tells me, what my parents tell me, what my teachers tell me, but I can reject it. But we begin with a constellation of values which can be altered by some kind of psychological process on our part. When people are converted to a religion, that is exactly what happens. I reject something and suddenly find myself accepting something else. That is what conversion is. It is the best example I can give.

*On the enlightenment and rationalism*

I don't reject rationalism. Certainly not. What I reject is rationality as the only approach to reality. I am pro-rationalist. I respect the 18th century and the 19th century rationalists very much. I think they got some things wrong, empirically wrong. They did not realize, as I think I do, that certain values clash and, therefore, the idea of a total harmony is not conceptually possible, and therefore they elaborated political systems which were intended to reach ends which don't exist. That may have led to a lot of damage. The fallacy about rationality is still there. It is a rational thing to say that liberty and equality are not compatible, and reason it if you like. It is a rationalist position to say that mercy and justice don't go together. It is a perfectly rationalist argument, if you like, to say that some things harmonize and others do not. It is founded on observation of experience in a careful and impartial way. What else is rationalism if not that.

I am interested in the counter-enlightenment. I take an interest in them. I am not in favour of them, no. I am on

\* The full interview will appear in *The Ideal of the Political* edited by Jyotirmaya Sharma, IAS, Shimla, forthcoming.

the side of the enlightenment. The enlightenment project can be retrieved provided it empirically goes about these problems carefully enough. My interest in romanticism and irrationalism is that they discovered certain things which were not compatible with the rationalism of the 18th century rationalists. And that is how they discovered the flaws in those movements. I don't go along with them in the sense of wanting to lead the romantic life or thinking of romanticism as a possible collective way of life. But I think it is important that certain flaws, certain mistakes have been perceived by these counter-enlightenment people, which if you are going to be enlightened at all, you have to take account of and attempt to fuse into your view of a tolerable life. I don't ask for more than a decent society. Well, we all know decency means avoidance of cruelty, of injustice, of sadism, of various negative tendencies which disrupt human life, cause pain, and cause disaster. I can't be more precise than that. A decent society is one which is founded on a degree of social justice. Not perfect. For if it is perfect, it will exclude other values too much.

#### *On religion and politics*

We inherit a religion. Most people, no longer so much in the present world, are brought up by their parents or guardians in the belief in certain faiths and certain religions. But, certainly religious values are among the central values which human beings have conceived, and obeyed, and worked for. But, of course, they can lose them. If you lose your religion – if you cease to be a Catholic and become a Protestant, or if you cease to be a Protestant and become a Buddhist, if you cease to be a Buddhist and become an atheist – your constellation of values radically changes. This can be done. How this happens is very mysterious. It is not necessarily a rational process. It maybe, but it maybe not. Who can tell how people arrive at what they believe.

Secular values such as liberty, equality, justice can be translated into the values of the somewhat fanatical religion of which you speak, or they cannot. If, for example, you think that all justice proceeds from God and is inscribed in sacred books or can be uttered by inspired teachers who are filled with the spirit of God and you are then asked: What about mercy? You say, 'No! The Book says justice.' Full stop. So you reject one value in favour of the other, because these values are an absolute. They are absolute for you. There may not be a conscious element of choice in this. This religion fulfils me totally. I want no other. Then that's a choice. But if you don't even arrive at that, you can just drift along peacefully without conceiving of any alternative.

The man who really said something very important and destructive about that (the incompatibility of religion and politics) was Machiavelli. I have written about that (in *Against the Current*). Machiavelli thought you can either be a Christian, which meant that you had to be humble and turn the other cheek and, so to speak, forswear the rewards of the material world to some extent. Or you could create

Republican Rome. But you couldn't do that if you were a Christian. So you had to choose.

There are two civilizations here. One is the Christian outlook, and the other is the Roman Republic. The idea of a Christian Republic is, therefore, a contradiction in terms. He doesn't say that. That is what his argument entails. And he, I think, is almost the first thinker who says: religion of a certain kind, the Christian religion, at any rate, is not compatible with certain political ideals. That is, compared with other ideals, with anarchy perhaps. For if you are an anarchist monk in a monastery, it is a collection of pious, blameless anarchists, all of whom believe the same thing. There is no conflict. But if you are not that, if you take part in what is called public life in the ordinary sense, then sooner or later there will arise a conflict between certain types of religious belief and certain types of desirable action or action that appears desirable to you.

#### *On the political*

Among the several activities in society – political, economic, and social – one may be more important than the other, given the circumstances. I can't say these are all of equal weight. They may or may not be. Who decides what weight be given to each such activity? You do. And those who think like you. You live in a society in which you communicate with people and to that extent you have common values with them. And so, collectively you and your culture, as it were, or people you are able to communicate with in some way, not just consciously, act in such ways to indicate that you are in favour of one kind of activity even if it to some extent aborts the other. If you have a society which is starving, it is probably more important, as Brecht said, to give them food than to provide democracy. So you can say in that society, social action, or if you like economic in that sense, is more important than political activity. Once they obtain their food and their drink, then the horizon changes.

Ends are ends. We can't tell. An end is something which you pursue for its own sake and not for the needs of somebody else. Like fanatics. They have ends with which we may not sympathise. But they are typical end-pursuers. A man who collects objects because they are blue is a man to whom blue is the only value. Why does he collect blue? Because it is beautiful? Why? Because it is blue. End of my life is to collect blue things. You may say a man like that is mad. But you will certainly understand what a purpose is, what a value is.

There are people who think art is the only thing which matters. There are people who think music is (the only thing which matters). They are not at all interested in politics. You may say they should be. Otherwise their lives may be adversely affected by their indifference to it. In fact they say: 'I live to compose; I live to paint.'

If people are in a community, then, of course, political ends must be desired. To be a community at all is to be



a political entity. I mean politics is what communities do. But there is nothing that, politics or anything else, from which everything flows. There is no one human activity which is such that everything flows from it. There are people who think there are. There are people who, no doubt, do think that politics is like that. Karl Marx said economics was like that, or technology was like that. There are many activities. Sometimes they clash, sometimes they coalesce. There is no reason for thinking that there is a monistic structure, and that everything is affected by a single movement of a single kind of activity.

I have no idea what man was like in the state of nature. I don't think anybody knows. I think it is a kind of fiction, the state of nature. We don't know what man was like before he lived in communities. I think men have probably always lived in communities. Therefore, the idea that first man was nasty and lived the life which was solitary, brutish and short, and then they all came together these men and said: 'Let us live together, more convenient that way.' That is a very mythological account. It can never be. Men have always related to other men. If they never related to other men, they were not men. The idea of Robinson Crusoe, solitary savage, growing up as a man, I think, is very speculative. And once they are together, they develop customs, they develop habits, they develop speech, they develop means of communication, they develop certain values, and that is that. And these they can alter. But there isn't a break, as Hobbes or Locke saw in Britain, between one kind of life, and then, by an act of collective decision a total transformation of life into something quite different.

Communities may or may not find a point of equilibrium or repose. Who can tell? They never have yet. But if you ask, can there be a completely motionless society in which everybody is reasonably contented, in which no change occurs, in which things just tick over, and repeat themselves endlessly. I see it is a possibility, but not a very probable one.

*On the absence of discussion in Berlin's work on technology and its effects on civilization and on human freedom*

I have no idea what Martin Heidegger thought about anything. I have tried to read him. I don't understand a single word.

But I don't think that is (the elimination of whole cultures and ways of life brought about by technology) deprivation of freedom. I believe that certain social processes probably do eliminate certain ways of living. So you can say, I can no longer do the things which I used to be able to do, or which others were able to do when they were members of such and such culture. But this doesn't deprive me of liberty. It merely deprives me of the opportunity of doing things which I no longer want to do, which I no longer imagine myself as choosing to do.

Of course, the Homeric world is different from ours. But as Vico once said: it is only in a world where people

are brutal, cruel, blood-thirsty, believed in war, only in that world could the great poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* be written. In our world in which these things are condemned, criticised, that kind of poetry can't be written. So you can say: we have lost the liberty of writing the *Illiad*. But we have only lost it because our world is different. And to hanker after another world is in a certain sense meaningless. You can't really transport yourself into the world of Homer and say, 'That's where I should prefer to live.' Maybe you can. But in that case all we are saying is that not everything is feasible. I can't change my character, customs, language, surroundings, history, and transport myself to some other world which did not have these customs, this language, these feelings, this outlook, these neighbours. Poets can say: 'I wish I was alive then, I wish I were like that.' But they don't really completely know what it would be to lose everything they have now and exchange it with what they would get there.

I know you are saying that certain forms of culture are eliminated by technology. Well, that means that technology shuts off certain types of behaviour, which, if it does shut them off (then this means) nobody wishes to indulge in them. If you want it to be like that, technology wouldn't prevent you. If it did, it is just an extra obstacle on the road to freedom. But there are plenty of other obstacles. Technology is not a particular monster on the path: it is in some ways more influential or more destructive than other things that stop me. Such as nationalism or capitalism or whatever else you would like to say. If you say, 'Were the Greeks freer than we are? Were the Romans freer than we are? Were the early Chinese freer than we are?' I think that is a meaningless question. For we are simply saying: were there more paths dug (on) which these people could walk if they chose, than we. We can't count them, we can't count ours, we can't compare them. It is an idle exercise.

Before you go on, do tell me what Heidegger says. I would love to know from you or anybody else. What is wrong with materialism, with technological culture? What does it deprive us of? How does Heidegger manage to escape from the perils, so-called, of technology himself? Did that escape of walking the Black Forest and reading Holderlin liberate him from technology and the market? But he thought it did! If there had not been technology in Gutenberg, there'd be no books. If there were no books, Heidegger would be in no position to read Holderlin. No, no. I think it is nonsense really. In the sense that, of course, the truth in the proposition was really a Marxist truth. There is one thing which survives in the general doctrines of Marx, which on the whole, to some extent, have been refuted as a fact. And that is, technology has a very powerful influence on culture. That is true. But why not? If it does, it does. Why does it destroy it (culture)? Why does one complain? Why would culture have been better if technology had not affected it in the way it does? It opens paths to human beings which were not open before.

# A communitarian response

S. ANITHA

THIS paper draws upon some impressions that remain from a short stay with the Munda tribe in Lohajimi village near Ranchi to reflect on how liberal concepts of democracy and development are understood and interrelated differently in a cultural context that is far removed from that of liberalism. Within liberalism, democracy and development are not isolated concepts – they acquire their meaning as a part of a conception of a good life that ties them to a set of other goals like rights, justice, equality and autonomy. By locating these goals in a self constituted individual subject, liberalism is inhospitable to claims of communities the subjects of which may be collectivities seeking to apprehend a meaningful order that community and not the individual agency supplies. An exploration of the

place of these concepts in a community where life is ordered according to a different system of meanings can perhaps help us appreciate the particular ways in which these so called universals are conceived and lived in.

Due to my brief stay in Lohajimi and status as a complete outsider, it is difficult to present a comprehensive picture of their understandings of these concepts – any such study involved attempting to step into their world from mine, by no means an easy task even with a longer stay.

The Mundas depend for their subsistence on agriculture, food gathering and, to some extent on hunting and fishing. They see in nature a cosmic system existing in arrangements of matter and revere hills, mountains, waterholes, rivers and trees. Bonga, or the spirit force, is the source of all life and is the pattern that connects the parts to the whole in

\* I am grateful to Niraja Gopal Jayal for encouraging me to write this and to Sudipta Kaviraj for his useful comments on the first draft of this essay.

which their place is assured and meaningful. Their village is on the banks of the river Karo, the site of the Koel Karo Hydro Electric Project and one of the first villages to be completely submerged along with its surrounding forests if the dam is built. The tribals of this region have fought a long battle against the Koel Karo project that threatens to uproot them from their traditional habitat. This experience informs their notion of rights, freedom and development just as the meanings attached to these concepts within liberal theory have changed over time to better protect the concerns of people who have thought through them.

**L**iberal theory conceives of society as a combination of individuals seeking to maximize their interests and liberal democracy acquires its meaning within this language. Politics within this Munda community is basically non-individualistic and the workings of parliamentary democracy are not always apprehensible when translated into this communitarian way of life. Their tradition emphasizes persuasion and consensus rather than divisive voting to resolve questions. This is seen in the way they adjudicate on minor disputes, thefts or make policy decisions. The day to day matters are settled in a meeting that takes place every fortnight. On the day I made my second visit to Lohajimi, the village was absolutely deserted. The men were attending a meeting to decide the fate of a petty thief while the women were gathering mahua flowers from the forest. The men came back late in the evening with a piece of mutton each – the collective had continued to deliberate till they reached a general agreement on a fine of a goat which they then divided equally among all present.

Special meetings are called whenever anything important comes up. The decision to oppose the Koel Karo project was taken at one such meeting many years back. At one of the subsequent meetings a point of discord was raised when some people wanted to work in the project office – opportunity for permanent employment are rare in this remote region

and they obviously didn't want to let it go by. It was decided in the meetings to 'let them' join and they now provide a daily link between the village and the township where the project office is located. Within liberal theory participation in decision making or accountability is often defended as a protective mechanism against arbitrary rule or undue interference in an individual's freedom. The decision to work in the Koel Karo project office, which, within liberal theory, would come under this realm of individual freedom here becomes an agenda for collective decision making. Democracy, then, functions towards a very different end in this community.

Mainstream politics, especially the electoral process, is often seen by them as providing an entry point to disruptive and divisive forces. The Mundas approach elections not so much through an identification with ideologies or with political parties as through their ties to their community – their votes are often reserved for 'their' candidates. The act of voting is also not seen as an individual exercise. But their participation in the agitation against the Koel Karo project has given them an ideological stake in the electoral process. Only one of the parties, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, stands opposed to the construction of the dam, so it was this party that they decided to vote for in the last assembly elections. But when the BJP fielded a Munda candidate from the Khunti constituency, this presented an enormous strain on their collective decision. Votes went both ways and talks with supporters of both sides revealed that both read each others acts as a betrayal.

**T**he Mundas also expressed their distaste for the electoral process as it brings in political parties to this region, where they otherwise rarely venture, the campaigns of which try to put 'wrong ideas into the heads of our people', viz., that they are Hindus, or that Ram, not Bonga should be worshipped, and so on. As far as the representative character of these elections are concerned, they see the logic of the electoral system as heavily loaded

against communities such as theirs, as they are aware that their way of life does not find favor with any of the mainstream parties. They have their own set of institutions, like these meetings and their own system of norms, like commitment to collective decision making as opposed to competition among political parties, which, they feel, better upholds the spirit of democracy.

Any debate on political participation within liberalism encounters the question of equality or justice which it tries, often successfully, to evade. The Mundas need not fear equality the way liberals do – the very norms which make for a democratic society also enable justice to prevail.

**A**part from collective control of the tribe's resources like the forests, they have other norms that are equalizing, or at least serve to minimize inequality. The system of private property exists, but with qualifications. For instance, when the tribals plant fruit trees in and around the village, ownership of the tree by one person does not mean that the others are prevented from enjoying the fruits of the tree. The owner of the tree has exclusive rights only over the wood. Rawls would thoroughly approve of this situation. From the original position, i.e. one of ignorance about one's standing in the world, if an individual is asked to choose the pattern of distribution in a society of tree owners and non owners, she would, according to Rawls,<sup>1</sup> look for a way to minimize her losses in case the lifting of the veil of ignorance finds her in the non tree owning section of the population. The minimum possible inequality that Rawls would argue for, would, in such a situation, be collective rights over the fruits.

The similarity between Lohajimi's norm and the Rawlsian liberal model is, however, deceptive. The unencumbered individual of Rawls' original position chooses, from a range of options available to her, a course of action that serves to minimize her losses rather than an option

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971.

that enhances a value like sharing, mutual respect or love. This unencumbered person seems to display all characteristics of a self-maximizing individual of a capitalist society. Though the outcome of the Rawlsian model and the communitarian society of Lohajimi may appear to be the same, they are definitely not arrived at through the same processes, nor do they mean the same for the people in these two societies.<sup>2</sup>

**T**his non-individualistic way of thinking, therefore, sets limits on the most cherished right of the liberals – the right to property. Rights in liberal theory are the legitimate claims that one person can make against others on the basis of her interests, be it a commitment to freedom, equality or even material resources. In a highly conflictual and competitive world, order is maintained by according moral importance to duty generated on the basis of reciprocal respect for an individual's interests. But there are other than such rights-based approaches to political morality. Communal morality among the Mundas is based not on a legal need (enforceable by the state) to protect individual interests but on a system of interpersonal trust, values and norms. Such a non-egoistic approach, as in the case of private property, would be incomprehensible in a world where rationality must naturally mean the maximization of self-interest.

Take the particular case of environment and animal rights. The Mundas' control over common property resources is guided by certain norms that govern their usage. These norms dictate, for instance, which tree can be cut down and which cannot, the season in which this is to be done (to prevent the tree from dying or getting infested with termites) and so on. Environmental integrity or right to non-individualized goods does not find satisfactory justification within traditional liberal theory. What is easily explained by values like respect for nature or a belief in the essential harmony of the ecosystem cannot be adequately covered by a lan-

2. I would like to thank Rinku Lamba, discussions with whom helped clarify some of these ideas.

guage of rights that implies control and self-interest.

Within liberal theory, the debate on animal rights is centered around the ability of animals to experience pleasure, pain, or to think rationally and self-consciously. To the Mundas, the question, 'do animals have rights' might not make sense, but the underlying sentiments do find a place in their system of meanings. They believe that each animal lives in a community of its own and has its own spirit force to protect and guide it. Hunting being an age-old practice of the Mundas, they do not worry too much about the question that occupies Singer: Can animals be killed?<sup>3</sup>

**S**inger's defense of animal rights proceeds in an extremely individualistic manner as he attempts to establish their rights on the basis of evidence that animals are self-conscious beings aware of themselves as distinct entities. The underlying position, it seems, is that the more they are like us, the more they deserve respect. Approaching the whole issue in a different manner, the Mundas believe that each creature has a *niyam* (roughly translated as norms) which it lives by. The elephants, for instance, do not kill humans unless we speak ill of them or show them disrespect. I was told about an incident that had taken place during the childhood of my informant when, during a drought, elephants raided the village for food. Most of the villagers ran away while a few brave ones tried to scare off the elephants by beating drums. An old man, who was lying in a drunken stupor nearby, began cursing one of the elephants and called it a thief. The elephant immediately left the grain and made straight for him, crushing him to a pulp.

When faced with a similar raid on his rice fields three years back, Soma Munda, the mukhiya of the village, went to his field along with his child and said to the elephant with folded hands, 'Maharaj (the Mundas always use any such term for the elephant – to call him by name is considered disrespectful),

3. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

you've been eating our crop for two days now. Here is my daughter, and there are four more mouths to feed at home – kindly leave some for us.' The elephant looked at him for a minute and then quietly lumbered away. The Mundas, too, hunt within their *niyam* – certain weapons or forms of hunting which give an unfair advantage to humans or are disruptive to the ecological balance are looked upon with disdain. The mechanical methods of fishing drew special flak from them, for fishing then no longer remains a test of skills or a battle of wits between the hunter and the hunted. Animals should also have a chance of escaping as humans have, of finding food. The justification for this does not lie in the individual animal's rationality but in the *niyam* of the spirit and the maintenance of the ecosystem.

Right to freedom in this community is not the autonomy of the individual from intentional coercion, as Berlin argues in his defense of negative liberty.<sup>4</sup> Autonomy changes its meaning to accommodate collectivities and not individuals as the subject of freedom. The only way in which the word freedom is used is as a claim made by their community on the outside world or the state.

**I**n the context of the strong attack on their lifestyle and livelihood that the Koel Karo project represents, freedom has become an overwhelming concern of the Mundas. I encountered frequent references to the uprising led by Birsa Munda against the British in the last decade of the 19th century to resist colonial interventions that threatened traditional ways of life. Autonomy or freedom here is expressed as the right to roam in the forests, gather fruits, hunt and cut trees when needed – a right that they no longer have in the protected forests. This freedom from external interference does not imply an argument for isolated tribal communities – they are far from being that.

There is an active process of interaction with the market where the Mundas sell forest produce like mahua flowers to

4. Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty, in *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979.

buy spices, salt, clothes, etc. They are conscious of the difference between interaction with the market and dependence on the market. Despite frequent destruction of their crops by elephants and wild boars whose natural food patterns have been upset by deforestation, a Munda elder rebuffed my suggestion that they grow more of cotton or bitter gourd (which they now grow for self consumption) as these crops are not consumed by the animals. He told me that they would rather harvest a smaller amount of pulses and rice than grow cash crops for sale, thereby becoming dependent on the market for food. Freedom, in this sense, seemed to imply freedom from the market – a usage that couldn't be further from the classical liberal meaning of the term.

**T**he notion of development is not absent from their system of meanings. Progress means an improvement in their life situation, but this betterment cannot be separated from their other conceptions of good life, i.e., their notion of freedom, democracy and their close relationship with nature. So it does not translate into acquisitiveness and control over nature that are the corollaries of liberal understanding of development.

The Mundas of this region have a fascinating repertoire of folklore which owes its vibrancy to its location in the forests and rivers around Lohajimi. I was taken on a guided tour to the waterfall where the river god had fallen in love with a girl who had come to fill water and had married her, the stream through which the bride and her divine husband, having assumed the form of snakes, had traveled to visit her parents and the lake which had been dug by the hoofs of the river god's cattle – the creatures of the forest. The river god, I was told, is looking for a second wife, so I was asked to desist from splashing around in the water lest I attract his amorous attentions! Even today, when a daughter is born to the *pahaar* community, from where the river god took his first wife, a *bindi* is immediately applied on her forehead to trick the prospective bridegroom into thinking that she is already married.

My guides pointed out that the dam, if constructed, would take away these sites – sites which give a cultural meaning to and explain the origin of their present practices and norms. What is being claimed as a collective right here is a sense of history and cultural memory. The norms that a community lives by come about through the inculcation of certain kinds of virtues or values among its people, a process in which story telling plays a key role. Displacement from their natural habitat, a consequence of the liberal development strategy, would stop the community from being able to reproduce itself through these processes in the face of a competing set of values which the tradition may neither comprehend nor be able to resist.

Democracy, equality, freedom or development, then, do not seem to mean what they do in a liberal language. Nor do individual rights seem to be as indispensable in Lohajimi as they do in a contemporary liberal state. But the concerns behind them are reflected in a way of life that finds its own spheres of justice. It would be foolish and tragic to impose one people's right or good on another.

**T**o the children of modernity, communitarianism seems to offer solutions to problems that modernity might not even be able to articulate. But it would be wrong to assume that oppressive tendencies exist only in modernity and not in traditional societies, or that oppression in a traditional community is some what more bearable than in the modern world, as Ashis Nandy seems to argue in his works. States which draw solely upon western political philosophy for theoretical justification of their moral and political ideals turn a blind eye to, or even preside over the erosion of cultural diversity by a homogeneous mass culture. To the frightening uniformity of the modern world which is fast drowning the many creative responses to the problem of living, the struggle of the Mundas of Lohajimi presents one possible answer, seeing which, the elusive dream, for a moment, seems almost within reach.



# Development projects and human rights

SUMANTA BANERJEE

THE word 'development' does not mean the same to everyone. One person's development can be another person's undoing. Behind the tall statistical claims of growth and productivity of the numerous development projects in Indian official reports, lie heaps of unofficial reports on the plight of thousands of people rendered homeless, unemployed, even physically maimed for the rest of their lives as a result of the construction and functioning of these projects.

If the Hirakud dam in Orissa (one of the earliest development projects which was initiated on the eve of Independence, and completed later by our government) today claims to supply power for industry, control floods in coastal Orissa and develop local agriculture, it cannot also be denied that the majority of the 100,000 odd villagers (from the 247 villages which were submerged by the dam) have yet to be properly rehabilitated even after four

decades — many of them either precariously living off the rocky lands allotted to them as compensation (which do not receive irrigation water from the Hirakud reservoir) or working as migrant labourers.<sup>1</sup> If the paper mills at Lalkuan in Nainital, run by a leading industrial house, claim to contribute to India's self-reliance in paper manufacturing technology, they cannot shirk off the responsibility of displacing 500 families from the forest land where they set up the mills, depriving these families of the forest produce on which they survived without providing them with an alternative means of livelihood.<sup>2</sup> The products of the Union Carbide Corporation were

1. Prasanna K. Tripathy and Sukadev Nanda, *The Hirakud Rehabilitation and the Displaced People*. Paper presented at the Seminar on development and displacement, 20-21 December 1987. Institute for Study of Society and Culture, Sambalpur, Orissa

2. PUDR (People's Union for Democratic Rights), *Gentlemen Farmers of the Terai*. Delhi, June 1989.

for all these years accepted as contributions to our developmental needs till the Bhopal disaster shook us up (or has it really?) to the hazardous working conditions under which these commodities were being produced.

**O**ne can of course argue, as many do, that such a trade-off between the advantages of development (in terms of increased industrial productivity) and immediate disadvantages to those either displaced by these industries, or reduced to being physical victims (like the Bhopal workers), will ultimately help the Indian state to be self-reliant and that in the long run this would open up avenues of employment for the poor. We are asked to accept short-term sacrifices for long-term gains of development. We are told how Europe reached the present state of development at even greater human costs borne by its people in the past. The transition to a modern industrial society with high growth rates, which is how development is defined in such arguments, is thus supposed to be inexorably painful for the people. The displacement of villagers, the pauperisation of the tribal people, the physical injuries caused by industrial hazards and toxic agents are therefore to be accepted as teething difficulties in the process of modernisation!

Such arguments, however, ignore fundamental questions like: what kind of development is necessary for India? Should development be reduced to claims of statistical data of increased productivity of certain goods at the cost of basic human rights? Are the economic, social and cultural priorities of our people taken into account when development projects are launched?

Surely, India has achieved self-reliance in certain types of industrial goods and infrastructure and self-sufficiency in foodgrain production, which are the results of industrial and agricultural growth during the last four decades or more. But have the gains from these outputs trickled down to the masses?

After almost half a century of development planning, in our villages where 75% of our people live, more than

one quarter of the population do not have access to drinking water and as much as 97% do not enjoy proper sanitation facilities. Infant mortality rates are as high as 82 per 1000 in Indian villages, which have only 31% of the country's hospitals and 27% of medical personnel. Even in the cities, where the urban poor are supposed to have been beneficiaries of the 'trickle-down' effects of industrial development, things are no better. At least 15% of the urban population, about 33 million people, do not get drinking water, and more than half do not have access to sanitation facilities. These unhealthy and unhygienic conditions also get reflected in the infant mortality rates in Indian cities, at 45 per 1000 births.

**O**ne can go on piling up such depressing statistics side by side with impressive figures of agricultural and industrial development, both incidentally available from the same official sources. The contrast is reinforced with every passing year in the lives of the Indian poor. Development, in purely statistical terms of growth, has been no butter for the parsnip that the poor have been growing, consuming and living with for ages. On the contrary, let alone butter, even the parsnip that they possessed has been confiscated by the state under the plea of development (e.g. the Rajaji National Park in Haridwar in Uttar Pradesh, which has taken over the forests and is denying the villagers their traditional access to minor forest produce on which they have survived all these years).<sup>3</sup>

Given this stark reality of the effects of the model of development followed by the Indian state during almost half a century, we need to question the concept of development – as enunciated by both the Indian state and the foreign aid-donors and advisors ranging from the World Bank, IMF to non-official agencies.

Alternative concepts and models of development, if they are to be relevant to

the basic socio-economic needs and democratic rights of the vast masses of the Indian poor, need to give primacy to the issue of human rights. Those proponents of liberalization who promote 'austerity measures' (meaning sacrifices by the poor by accepting unemployment) for future prosperity, hark back to the ruthless steps taken by the newly emerging capitalist classes in 18th-19th century Europe. In England for instance, they could oust farmers from their lands by the notorious procedure of 'enclosures', reducing them to hired labourers for capitalist development.

But since then history has moved a long way and the international community has recognized, apart from the civil and political rights enunciated in earlier centuries, the basic human rights of the unorganized toiling masses. These include the 'right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work... to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services' (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 23 and 25).

**T**he international community of nations has also enjoined on the member nation states to take steps to reduce infant mortality and provide for the 'improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene' (International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 12). Besides, the rights of indigenous people (variously described as tribal or aboriginal communities) have received worldwide attention in recent years. The UN Convention on Indigenous and Tribal People in Independent Countries (1989) grants these people extensive rights of ownership and of possession to traditionally occupied territories.

In fact, the history of the struggle for human rights has marched in step with the process of socio-economic transition, which we today describe as 'development'. The earliest phase of the struggle in Europe in the 18th century centred around the civil elements of the lives of

3 Security Survival: of forests and peoples. The struggle for the restoration of customary rights by Ghad Kshetra Mazdoor Morcha (Saharanpur); Ghad Kshetra Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti (Haridwar district); and Rajaji Park for People Support Group.

citizens—individual freedom; freedom of speech, thought and faith; the right to own property, and so on. These civil rights were formulated and fought for in the course of the violent disputes between the feudal aristocracy and the newly emerging bourgeoisie class and were finally codified in the constitution of the French republic. The second generation of rights evolved in the 19th century from political demands like the right to participate in the exercise of political power; adult franchise; the right to fixed hours of work; the right to minimum wages; the right to form unions and so on. These rights were conceptualized and legalized in the West through a series of agitations and struggles that corresponded to the various stages of economic growth under a capitalist system.

**S**ocio-cultural rights, including environmental and collective rights (like the right to self-determination of nations, and the rights of indigenous peoples) constitute the third generation of human rights. These emerged only in the 20th century. Despite some evident overlap, these represent claims recognized under the general rubric of human rights and which have developed over the last few centuries through years of battles waged by generations of people for a superior human civilization.<sup>4</sup>

It is against this background of the long history of global initiatives to protect and expand human rights that one needs to examine the Indian model of development and its operation. We just cannot go back to an era of economic development dominated by the ethics of 'might is right'. Gentlemen farmers cannot behave like feudal satraps and industrialists cannot resume the role of sweat-shop owners of the past. Any development project undertaken in any part of India today must conform to certain basic norms of industrial and agricultural operations and the rights

guaranteed to those affected by the setting up of such projects, as well as those working there.

Yet, in spite of the fact that our government has signed and ratified many of the international conventions that guarantee these rights and insist on norms for establishing and operating development projects, they continue to be violated with impunity. These violations can be broadly grouped under five categories. First, there is the fairly well-publicised complaint about development projects leading to displacement of people from their homes and habitat.

The story of the Narmada dam is too well-known to bear repetition. But, while 'forced eviction' in major dams like the Narmada is at least recognised (the term used by the UN to describe 'involuntarily removing people from their homes against their will'), little attention has been paid to the plight of victims of minor irrigation projects in obscure tribal areas, where lands are being acquired by the government for paltry sums. For setting up the Roro irrigation project in Singbhum, lands of 370 odd tribal households were acquired. Their community leaders were made use of by government bureaucrats as 'pawns to manipulate the people,' to persuade them to part with their lands for cash totally inadequate for their survival. This is an example of systematic undermining of the economic infrastructure of the tribal people through land acquisition that can be passed off as 'willing sale' of their lands.<sup>5</sup>

**A**part from dams, other types of development projects also displace people from their homes, or marginalize followers of traditional occupations (like state sponsored Reserve Forests or National Park projects ousting those who had survived on collection and sale of minor forest produce, or traditional fishermen in the coastal areas being threatened by mechanised trawlers). Human displacement by development projects is, however, not confined only to removal

from homes but extends to other forms of dislocation—uprooting from an environment which had been the workplace for generations; fragmentation of the community spirit caused by dispersion and the consequent mental disorders in the individual member of the community (particularly in the case of tribals among whom dependence on community solidarity had been deep-rooted); loss of occupations because of redundancy in the new set-up, as well as supersession, within the existing occupations, of practitioners of traditional crafts by outsiders well-equipped with modern technology (as in the case of the traditional fishermen).

**T**he next area of human rights violation, ironically relates to a governmental measure designed to help those displaced by development projects. In order to compensate for displacement, the government quite often 'rehabilitates' the evictees in new settlements. The compensation, however, has never been commensurate with the economic and social securities that these people had previously enjoyed. They lose their old economic stability (based on income from either agriculture or forest produce) and are unable to make good the loss by cultivating the new plots allotted to them, which are either infertile, or on rocky soil, or demand facilities like better irrigation (which are not available to them).<sup>6</sup> Among other resettled evictees, the usual complaint is about the problems of pursuing their occupations from the new environment, and a drastic fall in their earnings.

In this context, let me narrate a personal experience. At the end of April 1993 I visited a resettlement colony of 150 villages in the Malkangiri district of Orissa, bordering Andhra Pradesh. These villagers were moved from their original homes some miles away to this colony because of the Balimela hydroelectric project. As a sop they were promised supply of electricity from the project, which was not kept. Besides, the cluster had been cut-off from the rest of the district by the dam reservoir built under the

4. Cf. T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*. Cambridge, UK, 1950; Cees Flinterman, *Three Generations of Human Rights*, in Jan Berting and Peter Baehr (eds.), *Human Rights in a Pluralist World*. UNESCO, 1990.

5. Stan Lourdaswamy, JOHAR (Jharkhandis Organization for Human Rights) of Singbhum—Roro Irrigation Project: an investigative report, 1994.

6. Prasanna K. Tripathy, op. cit.

project. A steamer launch journey from the mainland to the nearest village of the colony takes one and a half hours. Commuters, mainly tribals, going to the mainland to sell vegetables or work for daily wages have to pay for this long journey forced upon them in the name of development.

**B**oth forced eviction and forced rehabilitation or resettlement of evictees are accompanied by severe repression by the state, which constitutes the third form of human rights violation. Cases of police atrocities on those unwilling to leave their homes, or be rehabilitated in new settlements, whether in the Sardar Sarovar project site, or in the Baliapal missile base, or in Bastar, have been well documented by civil rights groups.<sup>7</sup> Even court directives are flouted, as is evident from the bulldozing of houses and eviction of the people of Mitihini village in Sonebhadra district of Uttar Pradesh on 10 January 1995, as part of a scheme to extend the ash dykes of the Rihand super thermal power plant. This was in blatant defiance of a stay order on such evictions by the Allahabad High Court.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth type of human rights violation relates to injury caused by many of these projects to environmental and industrial hygiene – a reality that was brought home in all its shocking magnitude by the Bhopal gas disaster. In 1996, following the disaster, the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal on Human Rights and Industrial Hazards drew up a charter (after a series of public hearings on industrial hazards on a global scale). This codifies a variety of rights ranging from the rights of workers engaged in industries and of the community living around these industrial establishments to the common

and emergency rights to relief (in cases of accidents). The charter has gone beyond existing UN conventions by stating in unequivocal terms that: 'All communities have the right to refuse the introduction, expansion or continuation of hazardous activities in their living environment' and 'All workers have the right to refuse to work in a hazardous environment without fear of retaliatory action by the employer.'<sup>9</sup>

No less dangerous than the industrial hazards that cause immediate disasters (like the Bhopal gas leak) is the steady and slow poisoning of the environment by activities like deforestation (by commercial logging projects), or destruction of fish (both by the dumping of effluents into rivers by industrial projects and by the encroachment on coastal fishing waters by commercial trawlers in search of an immediate and easy catch, often killing the fry). While financial gains from such activities undoubtedly help the growth of industrial enterprises, and even swell our foreign exchange reserves (through the export of prawns caught by modern technological devices for instance) – for the original inhabitants of these areas, such 'developmental' activities have meant a gradual loss of livelihood, since their sources of income were intimately tied up with the old natural environment and their access to it.

**T**his brings us to the fifth, and latest, form of violation of human rights caused by development projects. It touches upon the most sensitive aspect of the socio-cultural norms and values nourished by our people. Development projects in tribal areas in particular have led to the influx of a large number of outsiders (whether as workers or contractors or traders). No one should object to this. India after all is a democratic nation and allows its citizens free movement across state boundaries. But then, how do these outsiders behave towards the tribal people? Let me quote from a report which describes the plight of tribal women in

Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, following the arrival of people from outside as employees of the mining project in Bailadila. 'The non-tribal migrant workers and officials entered into illicit relations with adivasi women, *rakhel* (mistress) as they say. They were promised marriage, but were invariably abandoned on becoming pregnant. Some of them became prostitutes....' The report cites a comment made by a villager on the achievements of the Bailadila project: '*Yeh project kuchh nahi layega, bus hamari behnon ko rakhel banayega* (This project will not bring anything except making our sisters into mistresses).'<sup>10</sup> That this is not an isolated instance is evident from numerous reports about the disruption of social living and family norms in tribal communities caused by the emergence of mafias consisting of goons hired by contractors and officials engaged in development projects.<sup>11</sup>

**A**t the end we are left with the basic problem plaguing development planners and the people – the problem of reconciling the methods necessary for higher productivity on the one hand and the people's needs for equal distribution of the output along with the protection of their rights on the other. This dilemma can be resolved if the planners and rulers get their priorities right. Development policies will have to reflect the priorities which the common people attach to their daily problems. Otherwise, as Gunnar Myrdal warned many years ago while addressing members of the Indian Parliament: 'There is a danger that in our endeavour to procure the machine and the tools, and to build factories and the dams and to find the money to finance it all, we become too materialistic and forget the human factor, the people whose bodies and minds must be the chief repository of a developing nation's savings and investments.'<sup>12</sup>

7. Bela Bhatia, Forced Evictions of Tribal Oustees Due to Sardar Sarovar Project in Five Submerging Villages of Gujarat – a report submitted to the Gujarat High Court, 15 July 1993.

PUPR, Bheeta Mati – A Report on Baliapal Missile Base and People's Struggle. Delhi, August 1988.

PUCL – Madhya Pradesh, Bastar: Development and Democracy, July 1989.

8. Kamlesh Gupta, et al, 'Illegal Displacement of Mitihini Villagers', *Lokayan Bulletin*, March-April, 1995.

9. Permanent People's Tribunal, Charter on Industrial Hazards and Human Rights; Article 6. Other Media Communications, New Delhi, 1996.

10. PUCL, Madhya Pradesh, op.cit.

11. Report of the Fact Finding Committee on Chilka Fisheries. Submitted to Orissa High Court, 16 August 1993.

12. Gunnar Myrdal, 'Indian Economic Planning in its Broader Setting', 22 April 1958.

# Strengthening the foundations

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THE way the title of this symposium is formulated – democracy and development – it could be construed that the two may not necessarily go hand in hand. It is necessary, therefore, to first clarify the definitions of these two terms.

If by development is meant a higher consumption of steel and electricity per capita as Nehru once argued, then it is strictly not necessary to have democracy. Development which rests on production of commodities can be achieved even through a dictatorial system of governance. But if development implies universal and adequate food, cloth and housing for every person and every single household, then it cannot simply be produced by a system other than democracy.

Universal availability of and access to food, for example, depends upon universal production and productivity in every farm and field. This requires the combined effort of all the farmers and agricultural labourers, from village to village. No centrally directed polity which has dispensed with democracy can create the necessary conditions and environment for such universal effort at producing

food. This universality at the production end is crucial for ensuring its access to every single household. Arguably, a dictatorial system could in the aggregate produce the requisite quantum of food, but it is well nigh impossible for it to ensure universal distribution, depending as it does on a centralised command and patronage system.

It is the core of an egalitarian proposition that minimum food and corresponding income (purchasing power) should be universally available, apart from other basic necessities of life. The question is not one of 'food security' which often implies creation of buffer-stocks by the government at central and regional points as insurance in a bad crop year. That is food security, but only at the aggregate level. In contrast, the availability and access to food on a totally dispersed universal basis means recognising that every single stomach is under a biological compulsion to have some food, not once in a season or sporadically, but every single day and at least twice a day.

This was the distinguishing feature and cornerstone of Gandhiji's economic



thinking and his definition of development – production of food in proximity to consumption points. Given his practical wisdom, Gandhiji saw that to ensure its access to every household, food would have to be produced in each and every village to the maximum extent feasible. If the pangs of hunger were to be tied down to the operations of the centrally controlled buffer stocks of the Food Corporation of India, which in turn depends on political decisions on whom to supply, how much and when, and thereafter on movement of wagons by the railways or road transport to carry it across the country to the points of consumption, then more often than not food would neither get delivered on time (recall the biological compulsion) nor at an affordable price. So our concept of development as universal access to food rests on two principal dimensions: one, timely and nearly universal, physical availability of food and two, the purchasing capacity of each household.

If the system of governance has to be tailored so as to accommodate these requirements, then clearly we have little option other than to knock at the doors of democracy. It alone can impart a stake, a sense of belonging and willing participation to every citizen and inspire and mobilise them fully for the needed endeavour.

Professor James Manor, who studied the working of panchayats in Karnataka (ushered in during the period of Ramakrishna Hegde's government), found that their most significant contribution was in acting as an alert and vociferous early warning system about likely famine conditions or threat of starvation deaths in their area. This contribution of the democratically elected panchayats, he felt, was unique because per se the administration and the government, even when elected on the basis of adult franchise, generally tend to deny famine conditions and routinely suppress news about famine deaths. Invariably, the approach of the authorities is that 'there are no shortages, no famine, no death; and that these are disinformation manufactured

by rumour-mongers.' But for democratically elected local representatives, who live in close day to day with their electorate, suppression of such facts is unlikely, if not unthinkable.

This brings us to a further point about the definition of democracy. If democracy is in its scope confined to only a central or state government or a central or state legislature, then while it may still be called democracy in a textbook sense, its impact on development will be skewed and limited. But if democracy is to be viewed as a universally representative system of governance in which not only do people matter, but in which the people at all levels share in decision-making and where the powers delegated to the higher tiers of decision-making are based on a rational system, then we may witness genuine development. That is, the village is responsible for all matters lying in its domain and within its capacity, and the district, state or centre do not appropriate any functions which the village is itself capable of handling. A similar approach determines the distribution of functions and load between the district, the state and the centre. In such a rational system, the construct of democracy is akin to oceanic circles rather than a hierarchical pyramid, where only the apex lives and the bottom remains inert, except when it is woken up every five years to stamp the ballot paper. Given its vast numbers and area, what India needs is more than textbook democracy – a system which universally provides opportunities on a continuous basis to every adult to exercise his/her mental, moral and physical faculties for decision-making about affairs of immediate concern.

Lest the foregoing discussion be dubbed as merely theoretical or hypothetical, we recall here India's practical experience of the past four decades as summed up in the eighth plan document. To quote:

'Our experience of development planning has shown that developmental activities undertaken with people's active participation have greater chance of success and can also be more cost-effective as compared to the development activi-

ties undertaken by the government where people become passive observers. The non-involvement of people has also led to the implantation in them of an attitude of total dependence on government for everything so that there has been a lack of effort by the people and lack of accountability to the people in the system of administering developmental schemes'.

'In the Eight Five Year plan, it is necessary to make development a people's movement. People's initiative and participation must become the key element in the whole process of development. A lot in the area of education (especially literacy), health, family planning, land improvement, efficient land use, minor irrigation, watershed management, recovery of wastelands, afforestation, animal husbandry, dairy, fisheries and sericulture etc. can be achieved by creating people's institutions accountable to the community'. Therefore, the focus of attention will be on development of multiple institutional options for improving the delivery systems by using the vast potential of the voluntary sector.

While the importance of decentralised local level planning and people's participation has been recognised, yet results achieved so far have not been very impressive. In this plan, therefore, a new direction is being given to achieve these objectives. So far, the approach to people's participation consisted in programme based strategies. In addition to such programmes the Planning Commission has now worked out institutional strategies which will mean creating or strengthening various people's institutions at the district, block and village levels so that they synthesise the purpose of investment envisaged in the Plan with optimisation of benefits at the grassroots level by relating these programmes to the needs of people. This can only be achieved through the collective wisdom of the community combined with the latest available know-how.'

'People's institutions have the following essential ingredients: (a) They are owned and managed by the users/stake-holders, producers or beneficiaries

themselves; (b) They are accountable to the community; (c) They have the capacity to become self-reliant over a period of time; (d) They have the capacity to diagnose the needs of the areas, interact with the governmental agencies in order to draw up need based local level plans and to implement those plans in close cooperation with the administration; and (e) They tend to bring about integration of various segments of the society for the achievement of common goals of development.'

'The role of the government should be to facilitate the process of people's involvement in developmental activities by creating the right type of institutional infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.'

'Encouraging voluntary agencies as well as schools, colleges and universities, to get them involved in social tasks and social mobilisation, strengthening of the Panchayat Raj institutions, reorientation and integration of all the village-level programmes under the charge of the Panchayat Raj institutions, and helping the cooperatives to come up in the organisation and support of local economic activities. A genuine push towards decentralisation and people's participation has become necessary.'

**I**ndeed, the potential for development through the active participation of decentralised, democratic, representative panchayat bodies is greater than that recognised by the illuminating plan document. Apart from being the prime instrument of decentralisation and development at the grassroots level, panchayats assume further importance because of two factors: one, the need to contain the relentless demographic pressures in India; and two, to optimise the use of scarce resources for development.

Kerala is the only state where demographic pressure has been contained, and the infant mortality rate brought down to 17 as compared with the national average of 84. Studies clearly show that widespread and effective delivery of elementary education and primary health services are the two major identifiable factors underlying Kerala's success

in curbing the population growth rate. Unfortunately, this lesson has still to be learnt by any other state, even though the moneys being spent on primary education and health are not low.

**T**he combined plan and non-plan expenditure by the state on primary health and primary education is staggering, rising to Rs 65,000 crore during the '80s. Yet most of the school teachers do not teach and the health workers do not treat. The local population has little control over them. They draw salaries from their respective departments. 'We are not your servants,' is the common refrain. However, when these functionaries were brought under the control of the elected mandal panchayats in Karnataka, their attendance improved dramatically. Can we afford to ignore this experience of Kerala and Karnataka, especially as we have yet to discover an effective, alternate solution to the population problem? Second, there is a run on our financial resources. Today, the exchequer is practically bankrupt. The main ornaments of the Budget are deficit and debt.

Notwithstanding the pressure of deficits and debt, it is not true that we have run dry of all resources. Our major resources for development consists of our soil, water, vegetation. We are not tapping these. If anything, a lot of wanton damage has been inflicted upon these precious resources at the altar of organised industry and infrastructure.

For a proper use of these resources, we have today the vast power of the scientific instrument of remote sensing for mapping the ground resources of soil, water, vegetation and minerals. This can totally transform our planning endeavour. But proper planning and implementation of the use/conservation/regeneration of these natural resources has to be area based. That, in turn, is diametrically opposed to the sectoral planning that we have hitherto almost exclusively relied upon.

Sectoral planning without the framework of area planning is often destructive of scarce resources. Sectoral compartmentalisation of our develop-

ment administration is the arch enemy of efficient use of resources. But area planning cannot even be conceived of without local institutions. And since area planning will have to order local priorities, optimise on existing investment (e.g. improved attendance of primary teachers and health workers ensured by Karnataka's panchayats) and mobilise local resources – it has to rest on the shoulders of the people and be led by them. It cannot be a bureaucratic venture.

People-led development would also bring in an invisible resource – a stake in development, idealism, ideas, as well some material resources – which today are denied to our development efforts.

**W**e now have the World Bank as the latest advocate of democratic participation in the formulation of development projects, proposing as in some of the European countries that development projects be put to popular vote. At first sight it may seem odd that a mega project and/or a hi-tech project, which is patently beyond the comprehension of a common man (which popular vote implies), should be subjected to the latter's vote or veto. But behind it there is the force of practical experience which is sought to be imbibed by bodies like the World Bank, though not easily or willingly, given the agitations, *andolans* and independent evaluations of the disturbing social, environmental and economic consequences of large development projects. This adverse process starts from the acquisition of land and disruption of livelihood sources of poorer families uprooted on a massive scale by these projects. These negative effects often outweigh the so-called benefits which the mega development projects claim to deliver.

In recent years, work on a number of such development projects has either been frequently interrupted or halted due to protest movements. In some cases (Silent Valley) even the initiation of projects has been thwarted.

Consider a recent instance: 'Tisco Gopalpur project caught in rehabilitation

controversy. Although the Prime Minister inaugurated the Gopalpur steel project promoted by the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO), the displacement resulting due to the land acquisition for the project has created a controversy in Gopalpur. The Gopalpur project will have a total saleable steel capacity of 10-12 million tons and negotiations are on with Japanese and Korean companies to finance the project. Soon after the announcement, the foundation stone laid by the Prime Minister for the steel project a few months back was immediately demolished by the angry villagers who were protesting against the compensation package offered by the project.'

'The company officials said that the rehabilitation work is progressing smoothly. But the local anger against the project was also due to the bitter experience of the people who were paid a pittance as compensation by other groups which have promoted mega projects, sources said. There are 11 villages on the plant site and about 2,500 families will have to be rehabilitated'. (D.V. Hegde, Economic Times, 21 April 1996)

Because of time over-runs costs went up, making the economics of such development projects unviable. Initially the authorities employed arm-twisting methods to crush such protests. But the protest was too strong to be put down by these unintelligent and crude methods. So, a view has been gaining ground in bodies like the World Bank that perhaps before the project is given a go-ahead it may be better to have a popular vote on such projects by people likely to be affected.

It does not matter through which route bodies like the World Bank or some of the governments learn these lessons. In our view even under full democracy, development may not be all that easy. But through a neglect or defiance of democracy, development just cannot deliver its promise except perhaps in bits and pieces. Development to be development must be whole, or rather wholesome. And above all it should be sustainable which presumes continuing popular support. Development rests on the foundations of democracy.

## A new paradigm

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GENUINE democracy – embodying political, social and economic democracy – is conducive to all-round development, durable prosperity and universal happiness. A system that calls itself a democracy but lacks even one of these aspects is only a pretence. Depending on the enormity of the pretence, its subversive influence on development varies.

Both 'democracy' and 'development' are grossly misused terms. Mock democracies are called democracies, and maldevelopment is called development.

Abraham Lincoln's description of democracy as government 'of the people, for the people, by the people' is accepted the world over as standard. By this yardstick a system of governance exclusively by elected representatives, with little scope for people's direct participation in decision-making, does not deserve to be called democracy. Lincoln maintained that social equality is essential for democracy; his opposition to the system of keeping slaves was actuated by this concept. He also enunciated that the enthronement of corporate interests and

accumulation of wealth in a few hands meant an inevitable collapse of democracy.

A system which is biased in favour of, or against, any particular religious, racial or language group or even a caste is no democracy. It is bound to continually be at war with itself and hence unstable. Thus, the mere existence of an electoral process in which the people's role is limited to casting votes at periodic intervals is nothing more than a pale shadow of democracy.

**I**n his final address to the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Ambedkar underlined the importance of the trinity – political, social and economic democracy for nurturing an ambience of liberty, equality and fraternity. 'To divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy.' 'Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it, social democracy.' About economic democracy, he said: 'We have (in India) a society in which some have immense wealth against many who live in abject poverty. This can only put political democracy in peril.' Social and economic inequalities will certainly 'blow up the structure of political democracy.' Two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the American Declaration of Independence, had similarly pinpointed economic democracy as an essential condition for a republic.

By the above definitions, France, Germany, USA, UK, Canada, Italy – the G-7 countries – are no democracies, although they are loudest in making noises about it. The testimony of Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States (1913-1921), remains conclusive. Commenting on US democracy, he said: 'The masters of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States. It is written over every intimate page of the record of the Congress. It is written all through the history of conferences at the White House that the suggestions of economic policy have come from one source, not from many sources.... The government of the United States at present is a foster child of special interests.' For this he sought to curb

monopolies, pushed through anti-trust laws, brought constitutional amendments for direct popular election of US Senators and for giving women the right to vote. His reforms for curbing monopolies have since been reversed – washed away in the tidal sweep of capitalism's corporate centralism. Clearly, without a fundamental change in the political, social, economic and technological philosophies and structures, it is not possible to reorient society towards genuine democracy.

Today's 'market democracies' surpass the exploitative aggressiveness of their previous incarnations. These are systems protecting the interests of the supranational mega-corporations seeking open access to raw materials and control over markets across the globe. The badge of democracy is only an instrument of deception. This is, in fact, a phase of insidious colonialism combining exploitative ruthlessness with the most beguiling of remote control devices embedded in offers of financial and technical assistance and promises of beneficial trade.

**E**ven before this insidious phase, Gandhiji called representative democracy, unsupported by participatory democracy at the grassroots level, a sham. Experience has shown that such spurious democracy can take countries towards increasing divisiveness and disruption. This is more true of populous countries. In a two-tier federal system, even if considerable power is vested at the state-level, this would only give rise to state-level power centres. Legislative, executive and judicial powers must be constitutionally vested in the basic units too.

In representative democracies, under a multi-party political system, a blind allegiance to personalities breeds attitudinal rigidities and subservience to political parties. It shuts out reasoned, issue-based discourse and splits the country both vertically and horizontally. When partisan vote-seekers join the electoral fray, money becomes the mainstay and the competition for distribution of largesse encourages corruption. As against this, a representative-cum-participatory democracy would cement people's unity, keep

up the momentum and quality of development and become a safeguard against corruption. Incidentally, our panchayati system which does not continually take its sanction from village assemblies and is dependent on the union or the state level government for its finances, is only a shadow of participatory democracy.

**N**ow, to a definition of development. Development is an unfolding from within, a flowering of the innate potential. Hence it ought not to be confused with growth, which is merely a quantitative concept. Growth is uni-dimensional. Unbridled growth is cancerous. As against this, development is multi-dimensional: it involves processes of growth, differentiation, and evolution in successive stages. Even in the arena of material production, it seeks an increase in the totality of goods *pari passu* an improvement in the production base, that is, in the state of the soils, the water resources and the atmosphere.

Today's tragedy is that mere growth, which suits business interests, masquerades as development. In a pursuit of material goods, GNP has become the index of material prosperity and the concept of material goods production, in turn, is now anchored in monocultural practices. An increase in a few select products is being sought at the cost of undermining the production base and even the life-support systems. Everything of value has been turned upside down in today's commerce-driven civilisation. In the economic sphere, what was tertiary (trade and services like banking, insurance, market information) has come to claim primary importance, and agriculture, the primary source of creation of real wealth, is now dependent on industry.

The shock of this topsy-turvydom made Professor Tinbergen, who propounded the concept of GNP as a measure of economic progress, bemoan that 'the use of GNP is steering the society with a wrong compass.' GNP gives, imperfectly and somewhat deceptively, a measure of the aggregate value of national goods and services. It conceals the distribution of wealth and gives a deceptive picture of social health. Since the computation of

GNP is not accompanied by a computation of Gross Destruction of Basic Resources (GDBR) – soil degradation, pollution of water and the atmosphere, depletion of mineral resources, the entry of toxic wastes in the food chain, and so on – it is a faulty indicator of economic health. Similarly, balance of payments, in an export-led-growth system, gives a highly distorted picture of the internal purchasing power of national currencies.

**T**hus, prevailing economic theories and 'developmental' concepts have only been pushing the natural-resource-rich but long repressed countries of the South to economic ruination. The paradigm of development that the IMF and World Bank, and the newly added octopus of WTO, are forcing down the throats of exploited nations, serve the interests of the elite of the industrial nations (and their collaborators within the impoverished nations) who feel that a majority of the world's people – the 'skinny skeletons, the black subhumans' – should perish to make the world more liveable for the elite of the fair-skinned races.

The illusive impact of tendentious economic theories can be gauged from the following example. About forty years ago, a Marxist economic writer of Trotskyite persuasion gave the following exposition. 'Development,' he said 'is like a churning process. Churning differentiates butter from the rest of the milk. Development invariably throws up certain sections of the society as disproportionately rich, in whose hands capital accumulates. You cannot avoid it.' This is a concept of development in which social justice is kept in abeyance. That even some Marxists shared this concept of development is significant.

The kind of 'development' which took place in West Europe and later in the USA and Canada is accepted as a model and an inevitable means to prosperity. That is why eco-destruction and common people's ruination with an icing of a thin layer of prosperity is called 'development'. The most unsustainable societies are called 'developed' and the world which will find no drinkable surface or

ground-water in the next century is called the 'first world'. For such maldevelopment, counterfeit democracies, even dictatorships of different shades could be suitable.

Mahatma Gandhi had called into question the pattern that passes as development. He called it a 'dehumanising pattern wherein machines become the master of men.' He also raised the question: 'If a small country like England needs the world as a market, how many worlds would we need if we adopt the same pattern?' This question was overlooked by his followers when they came to wield power in free India. The same question is now reverberating throughout the world, teetering on the brink of socio-political and ecological disaster. 'If only 6 per cent of the world population residing in the USA has to consume 40 per cent of the world's resources, then, on the same pattern, the world's population would need six and a half times this planet's resources.' Plainly, this is an absurd and insane notion of development.

**B**ut the finiteness of resources is not the only objection to this growth mania. What makes it lethal is the intertwining of all kinds of biophysical and biochemical imbalances with all manner of political, economic, socio-cultural and ecological evils into one web. A facet of this evil has recently been so powerfully manifest that even our health establishment has been obliged to point an accusing finger to the prevailing pattern of development. Faced with the phenomenon of one epidemic following another in an unending cycle, the Director of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases recently said: 'It is strange but true that we are paying the price for what passes as development' (Times of India, 20 October 1996).

The report goes on to say: 'One of the reasons for the upsurge of diseases is the deteriorating living conditions, particularly in big cities, often in spite of overall economic prosperity. Add to this the effects on ecology resulting from development initiatives as dams and irrigation projects, human encroachments on

forest areas, industrialisation and energy producing initiatives, and most importantly, unplanned urbanisation and excessive population growth.... This is not to say that development should stop but the health component should be factored in planning such projects.' He was yet to see that if poverty eradication and health *for all* people are to be factored, we must reverse the direction of development.

**D**evelopment guided by people's wisdom is different from one spearheaded by the privileged classes. The former favours nature-harmonic, hence people-friendly and inexpensive technologies amenable to local control. The latter, in the name of modernisation, opts for centralising, 'nature-conquering', technology-based grandiose projects in which contractors and professionals play a big role. It gives primacy to 'infrastructure' on the western model – express highways, mega power stations, proliferating chemical industries, airports, super-fast trains, computer networks, stadia and golf clubs, while behind the edifice, multiplying numbers of people decay in slums and tattered huts.

The other path of development aims at a steady rise in the standard of living of all people, with the last person first in the order of priorities. It comprises high-yielding organic agriculture rich in bio-dynamic properties, decentralised electricity generation and renewable energy production for everybody's use, non-polluting industry and transportation; and housing, education and health for all. Such universally shared prosperity, in which there is no beggar and no super-rich, where the range of inequality is within conscionable limits depending only on merit, can only be achieved through genuine democracy.

Democratic development has no need for foreign capital which is a major instrument of exploitation in the hands of foreign investors. Of course, it believes in international collaboration in science, as distinct from courting the yoke of alien technology which is rooted in the principle of conquering nature and is dependency perpetuating. The upsurge of



scientific and technological creativity from the ranks of the labouring people of Russia during the post-October Revolution days, gives the assurance that in a true democracy, the farmers, industrial workers and artisans will throw up Michurins, Vavilovs, Sukachevs and Stakhanovites galore. Indian farmers and workers have a high tradition of creativity in nature-harmonic ways (India's traditional agriculture was the most ecological and productive *in the world* before the British rule caused its destruction).

**D**emocratic development eschews technology based on the principle of force for it knows that bounties can be obtained by understanding Nature's ways and cooperating with it. Moneybag democracy seeks to apply force on man and nature, which eventually proves disastrous.

In a multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-lingual country, where multiple castes/denominations/tribes also exist within each community, psychic unity and a removal of the last vestige of social inequality must be the foundation of democracy. Diversities there must be, to enrich life and strengthen the mosaic of society. But these have to be rooted in unity. Without the subsuming urge for unity, diversities can be a game-plan for separatism. Harmonism is the name of a regime where none would have to risk loss of identity and none would have a licence for obsessive separateness to build barriers between oneself and the neighbours of other faiths.

Democracy provides spaces for pluralism of cosmogonic beliefs and rituals and promotes universal love. It enjoins protection of local flora and fauna as a sacred trust and instills into everybody the responsibility to make the habitat healthier and lovelier. This is in contrast to bourgeois democracy which implicitly believes that life on earth exists only for the enjoyment of the 'fittest'.

Genuine democracy recognises the importance of multiple loyalties – to the family, locale of birth, the linguistic group and to the nation. It also recognises that all these loyalties can be harmonised. If any one of these vital emotions is sought

to be repressed, it becomes perverse and seeks to overreach itself, introducing a whole series of other perversions along the chain. When legitimate emotions are accorded their rightful place, the outcome will not only be harmony and peace but also a high order of creativity.

Democracy's soul lies in the commitment to a lifestyle of simplicity. When simple living becomes a nation's ideal, the process of levelling up of the poor can work. A failure to uphold this ideal encourages consumerism based on greed and unfair competition. It diverts resources to wasteful channels and makes the poor victims of the 'demonstration effects' of the rich people's 'conspicuous consumption'. Thus, it seeks to keep vast masses of the poor doomed for ever. On the other hand, a life of simplicity means consuming the least in quantity and the best in quality and organicity, consistent with the requirements of radiant health. Only this kind of lifestyle can leave ecological resources unimpaired and undiminished for future generations.

**T** rue democracy seeks the highest fulfillment of every individual, which is possible only through his/her concern about society's welfare. And the collectivity can be creative and prosperous only when the individual finds fulfillment in a climate of freedom. This close complementarity between the individual and the collective is the hallmark of democracy. True democracy's concern is for each member's individuality and fulfillment, as well as the collective's shared prosperity and mutually supported creativity.

Healthy nationalism is a prerequisite to democracy and a bulwark against imperialism. This must not be confused with rabid nationalism (i.e. chauvinism) which keeps the country blind to the knowledge originated or experience gained in other countries. Healthy nationalism feeds and is fed by sub-nationalism on the one hand and internationalism on the other. Nationalism is the link between localism and universalism. Without its leverage people cannot be lifted from parochial localism nor can the high of

universalism find a medium to become an accessible value for the common people. Democracy withers under the onslaught of imperialism without the protection of nationalism.

Democratic socio-economic development would seek to deconcentrate capital; deconcentrate land holdings; decongest habitat; decentralise industries; promote de-urbanisation and eliminate distinction between intellectual and manual labour in a social climate where each form of labour spurs the creativity of the other. Of these six streams of programmes, de-urbanisation needs some explanation. It must become a primary objective because urban growth pre-empted resources and starves other programmes. The per capita expenditure on materials for an urbanite is about six times that on a rural person. The supply of water and electricity to high-rise buildings, drainage, sewerage, roads, lighting, the cross-haulage of goods and services to and from the towns account for this multiplier in resource depletion. Urbanisation forces breaks in the nutrient cycles, a fundamental process of Nature. It causes high density of pollutants in industrial conurbations and makes their cleaning a high-cost proposition.

Ironically, elitist democracy furiously promotes urbanisation. Such a 'development' will not succeed in improving the urban milieu either, because the starved rural areas will steadily push out more and more people towards the cities.

**S**ince economic policies in a genuine democracy will necessarily be vastly different from today's globally dominant trend, their formulation and implementation will invariably depend on the strength of the people's will. This can crystallise and assert itself only if the structure of constitutional bodies is changed at the roots – that is, if a unitary or two-tier federal system yields place to multi-tier federalism. In a populous country like India, a five-tier federalism is necessary which means that constitutionally there need to be legislative, executive and judicial bodies at the levels of (i) cluster of villages (say, four or five villages);

(ii) mini-block levels (say, units of 20 villages); and (iii) block levels (comprising 50-60 villages), too. Basic decisions concerning their own lives must be taken by assemblies of people – they should, themselves, for instance, discuss farming techniques, cottage industries, family-wise consumption needs and availabilities, health care and disease prevention, education, and the estimates of resources needed therefore. For all these, the village assemblies must have legislative, including tax levying powers, instead of being ‘hangers-on’ to the district administration’s disbursements.

This is a far cry from our present panchayat system which does not vest power in the people. Autonomy at different levels means multiple structures of shock absorbers as well as mechanisms reinforcing people’s power. This is genuine self-determination at the grassroots level. Five-tier federalism implies clear-cut delimitation of jurisdictions. For example, the Union government’s jurisdiction may be limited to external affairs, defence and defence-related industries, foreign trade policy, currency, communication, space, nuclear energy research. Each level would be sovereign in its own sphere.

**T**wo kinds of objections may be raised against this kind of decentralisation. One, that it would provide an opportunity to local despotism. Two, some fissiparous elements may raise their heads with a loosening of centralised control. Poor people’s solidarity is the remedy for local despotism. Alongside, a vigorous movement to strengthen inter-cultural bonds can create an ambience in which each linguistic or ethnic culture finds reciprocity in every other culture. This bonding, not centralism, is the basis of unshakable integrity. On the contrary, too much centralism provokes separatism. In sum, democracy needs a constitutional restructuring enshrining multi-tier federalism to empower people to take basic decisions.

Multi-tier federalism, however, cannot function if society’s basic technologies are centralism-oriented. For

example, there is no point in declaring panchayati raj if agriculture has to depend on chemical fertilisers, chemical weedicides/pesticides, irrigation water from trunk canals connected to big dams, and electricity generated afar. Each of these is beyond the control of the panchayat. In such a technological regime the panchayat can only suck its thumb. Democracy, therefore, needs a genre of technologies congruous with decentralisation. Nature-harmonic technology is local resource-use oriented, conducive to people’s economics, and amenable to people’s control, apart from being non-polluting.

**D**emocratic development has to give primacy to rebuilding the infrastructure of life. This means preserving the ancient forests plus reforestation of denuded mountain ranges, hills, wastelands and planting trees on roadsides, canal sides and embankments of tanks. Forests are the base camp of oxygen-dependent forms of life’s journey on this planet. Ironically, this basic fact is forgotten by ‘modernist’ planners who focus on building infrastructure for industry and commerce by destroying the infrastructure of life itself. Besides, forests are the foster mother of agriculture in perpetuity.

Without a strong support base of forests, there is little chance to revive agriculture. Protection of the ancient wildernesses is particularly important because their plant varieties may contain the genes needed for upgrading the fast-deteriorating hybrid crops introduced by genetic engineers. Yet another grim reminder of the importance of coastal forests – the mangroves – comes from the repeated cyclones in Andhra Pradesh. They are nature’s agents for both saving the coastlands and heightening the productivity of coastal waters.

In the sphere of primary production (production of food, basic raw materials for clothing, housing, medicine and agricultural raw material for industries), people-oriented development would need a systemic approach. Productivity is at its highest when agri-horti-floripisci-silviculture, poultry farming and

animal husbandry are integrated as one system where the waste products of one become the food for another. Poultry droppings and animal dung become the manure for cereals and vegetable production and fish culture. Floriculture, by attracting bees and other insects, steps up the pollination of vegetable and fruit plants. The stubble and straw fertilise the soil and serve as a mulch. Silviculture fosters all crops. The trees’ myriad roles have been mentioned above; its role even as a perch for birds which devour the crop-damaging insects is considerable.

This integrality makes available all the necessary inputs for the cultivars on the farm itself. Diversity becomes an insurance against pest multiplication. There is no need for chemical fertilisers and chemical pesticides, or for that matter any other external inputs.

A major difficulty in this integral approach is the small holdings of our farmers. In many areas, an overwhelming majority of farm holdings are less than half an acre. Rotation is possible in such plots but the scope for mixed cropping or poly culture is severely limited. To overcome this problem it is necessary that small and marginal farm-owners cooperate in joint farming.

**A**s for the landless, a major reliance would be on rearing cattle and poultry and participation in agro-processing industries, pending redistribution of land. With the spread of biogas, the manufacture of solar collectors, solar cookers, solar water heaters and cycle parts in the village, newer avenues of employment will open up. Restoration of irrigation tanks, re-excavation of canals, desilting of river beds, afforestation of hills and wastelands, enhancement of soil organic matter of all arable lands, herbal gardening, preparation of ayurvedic medicines and so on would add useful assets to the community while creating jobs. This is in contrast to bourgeois democracy’s creation of some jobs in factories while causing far greater ouster from jobs in the unorganised sector.

Democracy’s litmus test is food sufficiency with an assurance of two

square meals for the poorest. Hence production of wholesome food (as against today's poison-loaded foods) and its equitable distribution are the kingpins in its programme.

A widening of the nutrition base is important for both people's health and environmental soundness. In earlier times people used to derive sustenance from about 3000 items of food. Over the millennia, mankind's nutrition base has shrunk to only 150 items, of which 30 are major, of which, again, only 6 are staples. Many of the fruits, flowers and leaves which formed part of the villager's menu barely 60 years ago have become scarce due to our imitation of urban ways and concepts of 'modernisation'. In the interest of conserving bio-diversity in nature and improving standards of nutrition, the diversity in food needs to be restored. For this, every basic unit of our habitat must co-exist with forests.

**S**ince energy is crucial to every form of economic activity, the refashioning of policies for energy generation and use will play a crucial role in democratic development. The society must fix a ceiling and a floor for every individual's energy consumption. A policy of restraining consumption of fossil fuels, particularly petroleum, should be rigorously followed to prolong reserves. All possible measures need to be adopted to generate and use renewable forms of energy, barring hydel from big dams which is ecologically destructive. Proven technologies exist for harnessing solar energy, wind energy, biogas and electricity from mini-and micro-hydel. Technocrats may claim that these forms of energy are not yet cost-competitive, but research will remove the shortcomings, and large-scale production will bring down the costs. The discouragement by vested interests, namely the petroleum, chemical and electrical companies is one reason why research in these has not got an impetus.

There is yet another aspect which needs redressal. So far the practice has been to overestimate commercial energy requirements, particularly electricity.

People-oriented development will need to estimate the demand from each major end-use sector and to ensure that a user-need which can be met by a low-grade form of energy would not be addressed by a premium-grade fuel. For example, cooking should not use electricity, and refrigeration and space heating/cooling should only use solar power.

**I**n electricity planning, the accent has been on a national grid, that is on a geographic integration of its generation and use. Democratic development will lay emphasis on *on-site integration of different forms of energy*. This means, every village community will attempt self-sufficiency by integrating biogas production (based on animal dung, human wastes and plant wastes), energy generation by solar collector, solar cooker, solar pond (wherever possible), photovoltaics, photosynthetic energy and hydels. This will totally alter the picture of dependence on multinationals for equipment supply, erection and commissioning of large power plants, and drastically reduce the cost of transmission, besides eliminating the vexed problem of frequent interruptions due to tripping and theft. This will help the growth of new industry at decentralised levels and make possible the use of power in the hamlets of the poor. For mini-hydel generation, run-of-the-river systems which do not require dams are eminently suitable. Mangal Singh, a farmer in Lalitpur district in U.P. showed that micro-hydel could be produced even with a gentle gradient, provided a large quantity of water was present.

Despite the multiplication of renewable energy output, fossil-fuel-fired electricity will continue to be in demand, though on an attenuated level. To meet this need, the technology of cogeneration (regeneration of steam simultaneously with electricity) is a must. Cogeneration demands that the generating units be small so that the pipeline (to transport hot water to hospitals, hostels, chilling plants, washeries, households) cost is minimal. When the energy generation pattern changes so radically, from its centralist orientation to decentralisation proneness,

everything else would change. The use of fluidised-bed technology which has varied uses, from domestic oven to furnace, has a great change potential.

In industry, the pattern which obtains in Nature's kingdom should be taken as our model. In Nature, whether in the animal or in the plant kingdom, the smallest are the largest in number and the largest are the fewest. In industrial patterning, small industries have to be ubiquitous, practically in every cottage and the largest should be allowed only where there is a decided advantage in their favour. There is a particular logic in this approach. An increase in size often leads to an exponential rise in its pollution-creating potential. On the other hand, the advantage which large scales yielded in terms of energy economy is fast vanishing on account of society's demand that 'the polluter pay the de-pollution costs.'

**T**his means that integrated steel plants, petroleum refineries and petrochemical plants which acquired mega-dimensions in a regime where only marginal productivity of capital counted – the costs of water and air pollution were treated as external factors; damage to plant and animal life around were left out of account – would now have to internalise these costs. The overall *negative balance of benefits* that these show in a social accounting system would introduce a new concept of integration with the local economy and hence, of a scale where the costs and benefits to entrepreneurship will have to measure up to those of the society.

In housing, a pro-people development will stop the increasing encroachment of townships and luxurious suburban villas on arable lands. It will encourage the building of houses based on 'solar architecture' in which site-specific parameters, such as seasonal inclinations of the sun's rays and direction of wind become the prime factors. Insulation from heat and cold and the requirements of natural lighting is taken care of in the design of the house itself. Inexpensive mud-built or pre-fabricated houses with proper ventilation, sanitation and

provision of aircraft under the thatched roof for cooling will come into vogue.

In transportation, too, democracy will bring a veritable change. Under bourgeois democracy, everything is driven by competition; hence the demand for higher speed in transportation. Low speed transportation has been pushed to near-obsolescence, even if it be the least consuming of commercial fuels. Bullock carts, small boats plying in canals and propelled partly by water drive and partly by man's muscle-energy are being replaced by diesel consuming road transport like 'tempo'. In contrast, genuine democracy recognises the need for low, medium and high speed transport. Since high speed transport (jet aircraft) has a high ecological cost, it should be restrained by deterrent tariff. In communication, however, a democracy must have an efficient satellite communication system. The more efficient the system, the more the saving on transport.

**E**ducation and health care are vast subjects. All that can be said here is that education under people's regime will be integrated with life so that secondary school students practicing agriculture, in their awakened inquisitiveness, will be able to imbibe – through their own practical work and enquiries – the basics of soil chemistry, soil biology, nature's nutrient cycles, geological principles, hydrogeology, plant pathology, entomology, along with a broad humanist culture. This integration with life's problems is the key to creative education. Student-teacher-farmer-artisan collaboration in a continuous learning-teaching process will open up a vista of generation and acquisition of knowledge in an animated interchange of roles.

Under genuine democracy, health care will give highest priority to pollution-free environment, nutrition plus vitality-building *yogasanas* for all. The dominance of western medicine will be replaced by equal scope for all branches of medical science in which traditional medicine, tribal medicine, ayurveda, homeopathy, unani and siddha systems will compete with allopathy. The present-

day separation of body from mind, the concept of disease as malfunctioning of a particular part of the 'body-machine', the dominant practice of extracting only the 'active principles' and leaving out important trace elements and other associated ingredients leads to mutation of disease organisms making them resistant to medication. The emphasis on hard technology, an over-use of drugs, excessive specialisation in medicare and the resulting phenomenon of steadily increasing incidence of doctor-induced diseases will be replaced by a more holistic view of health and medicare.

**T**he approach outlined above to different aspects of development is diametrically opposed to today's dominant paradigm. Many will argue that 'when globalisation is the on going process the world over, we cannot afford to take to a wholly different pattern and face isolation.' There is a fallacy in this argument. To such advocates the world has become so small that a free flow of capital and unrestricted remittance of profits has become a must. But when it comes to movement of people, the world suddenly becomes so large that the rich countries insist on the freedom to raise stiff barriers against immigration and wink at the growth of racism against the black people.

While discussing democracy and development, we must remember that democracy is now in grave peril. It must be rescued from the newest, most deceitful and ferocious imperialism. While talking enchantingly about 'free trade for everybody's prosperity' it is plundering the resources of the tropical and sub-tropical countries and even pirating the latter's plant, animal and human genes by myriad frauds. Phony democracy will become increasingly menacing before being thrown into the dustbin of history. Democracy today entails greater costs than in the earlier struggles for freedom because large segments of the nations' elites have been inducted into the orbit of imperialism. The one redeeming feature is that a global opportunity has opened up for an alignment of all poor nations, together with the poor people within the rich nations.

# Grassroots democracy

RAJESH TANDON

FIFTY years after independence, it is time to assess our long experience with systems of governance as also to draw upon the experience of other post-colonial states in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

After the experience of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, more countries have now accepted democracy as the most appropriate form of governance. This new global consensus on democracy is a welcome development. Yet, much of the substance of this democracy still continues to be narrowly defined in terms of a multi-party polity, periodic elections and separation of the judiciary, legislature and executive. Democracy as a grassroots praxis has yet to be fully integrated even in this new consensus. By examining the experience of democratic governance in India (as elsewhere in countries of the South), it is possible to further explore the meaning and implications of grassroots democracy.

Democracy as a form of governance has been variously defined and articulated. While there are a variety of forms in practice throughout the world, there are some common features of democracy:

The first feature is *representation* on the basis of universal franchise. Under this principle, every section of the population gets representation in a democratic system of governance; all adults participate in the election of their representatives. The rationale is that by providing opportunity to elect representatives, the interests, needs and priorities of each section of the population are represented in the decision-making process.

The second feature of democracy is *voice*. In a democratic system of governance, all citizens have the right to be heard. Opportunities and fora to express their points of view, to pay attention to their agreements and disagreements, constitute an important feature of democracy. Formally accepted methods of seeking opinions and feedback from all citizens are maintained in a democracy.

A third feature of democracy is *due process* as a legally sanctified process of petitioning. Should a citizen hold a grievance against any branch of the government, there should be a mechanism for redress. Courts, tribunals, ombudsmen are examples of such mechanisms of 'due process' in a democracy.

Finally, democracy implies a system of accountability of the governing mechanism to its base population. It is assumed that democratic governance, by its very nature, has built-in mechanisms of accountability to the larger population. Leaders in government and public officials are expected to be subjected to regular and comprehensive public scrutiny as a means of ensuring their accountability. While democratic systems of governance could vary significantly across regions, levels and countries, most do incorporate in some appropriate form the features mentioned above.

When we examine our system of democratic governance in the context outlined above, it is a moot point whether our democracy serves and promotes long-term, equitable, just and people-centred development. Regular elections, with a few exceptions, have been held in India.



Yet, there are enormous distortions in the process of representation based on universal franchise. The system of governance has been 'captured' by a section of vested interests thereby excluding and denying voice to a large section of our illiterate, poor, marginal population. The system of legal jurisprudence which we inherited from our colonial masters and have since tried to perfect, leaves even the educated, urban middle class feeling cheated, entangled and excluded from the legitimate 'due process'. As for the poor and unorganised, for whom seeking redressal to their grievances invites only intimidation, harassment and violence, the less said the better.

Finally, in the current scenario, little needs to be said about accountability. Open and fair criteria of decision-making, transparency in the process of decision-making, obligation to provide answers for one's conduct and so on (from the government and public officials) seem beyond the hopes and imagination of ordinary citizens. A complete absence and distortion of transparency and accountability in India makes a mockery of democracy itself.

It is in this context that we need to understand the alien character of our macro system of democratic governance. The system inherited from our colonial masters was adopted without any appreciation of the grassroots realities and reference to historical processes. As a result, the macro system of democratic governance did not develop strong links with the existing processes and structures of grassroots democracy. This may perhaps explain the major weaknesses of our current system of democratic governance. Its disarray may prompt many to conclude that it is inappropriate to meet the challenge of economic and social development in our country. Such a conclusion would be both simplistic and problematic. Therefore, a deeper exploration of grassroots democracy is needed to suggest ways and means to strengthen the system of democratic governance.

In comparison to the formal, more legislated system which operates at the

national level, grassroots democracy can only be experienced in practice at local levels. It is not a system of functioning based on formal rules, procedures, guidelines and so on. By its very nature, grassroots democracy is practiced through a system of norms, values, social processes and institutional arrangements fuelled by the commitment and capacities of ordinary people. The expression of grassroots democracy can thus be seen in myriad local, informal, formations and associations of citizens throughout the country.

Historically, a vast number of people found ways to come together at the local level to address some of their common problems. Our village society has witnessed many such formations: caste formations, tribal councils, associations for undertaking agricultural operations, cooperatives, social associations to meet a variety of cultural and social rituals and obligations and so on. In recent years, contemporary forms of these associations have also evolved in many parts of rural society: youth associations, women's associations, associations of people engaged in joint efforts for the protection of forests and water, and people congregating for cultural occasions (like Ramlila and Puja societies). Many of these local groups address basic needs of the local community such as health, education, drinking water and fodder.

Just as local issues and priorities vary, so do the forms and compositions of local associations. Likewise, in urban centres, citizens often come together at the neighbourhood level to organise their own life: sanitation, security, cultural events and so on. A large number of these local associations continue to operate in a somewhat invisible manner. Often, for an outsider looking in, associational life of a community may not be visible. In some ways this low profile gives protection to their continued functioning, for as they become visible, the state begins to interact with them. Slowly but surely it manages to incorporate them, formalise them, resource them and thereby under the guise of a democratic

system convert them into an appendage of the 'state'.

What are some of the features and aspects of these local institutions? By their very nature, they focus on *specific issues* like water, health, hygiene, education, children, social functions, agriculture, crime, peace and protection of the environment. One could mention any number of such issues that affect human society and there are several examples of such local associations working on each of these areas. This specificity of focus provides the purpose and rationale for such associations. The second feature of these associations is their *voluntary* character. People come together because they want to, not because they are so deputed, or because it is mandatory, or because of some external compulsions. The voluntary nature of such associations generates a level of energy and commitment which acts as a fuel for the functioning of these associations.

The third feature of such associations is that they continue to maintain a largely *informal* basis of functioning, though sometimes they may select some secretary or so-called office bearers to facilitate their functioning. They govern themselves on the basis of commonly held norms and values, and they manage themselves on the basis of social and interpersonal processes of communication, mutual trust and obligations. The quality of face-to-face interaction and related social mechanisms provide the basis for such informal functioning.

This combination of features necessitates that associations tap potential, energy and commitment of ordinary human beings. Associations of this variety thus bring out the capacities of compassion, camaraderie and solidarity inherent in all human beings. They bring out the humanity in a common search for a good and peaceful life. Through their functioning such associations provide the basis for generating more effective and rooted local leadership.<sup>1</sup> Lest it appear that

1. Norman Uphoff, *Local Institutional Development*. Kumarian Press, Connecticut, 1986.

all local associations represent the ideal type mentioned above, it is important to point out that circumstances and conditions vary greatly across the country. As these associations are formalised, begin to attract external attention and resources and get involved in the mainstream political process, they tend to incorporate many of the distortions of the formal system of governance elaborated above. This often leads to internal struggles, infighting, misappropriation, and self-centredness. However, any collective human enterprise is bound to generate some tension and conflict. Differences in perception, attitudes, values, priorities and perspectives are all an inherent part of collective social and human processes and local institutions tend to develop their own unique and humane ways of dealing with such tension and conflict.

**T**he above features which make for effective functioning of local associations are closely linked to indigenous local knowledge systems. Historically, a great volume of knowledge has been produced through collective human endeavour in the solving of specific life problems. This 'knowledge-in-use' has over generations been transmitted largely through oral and symbolic means. This knowledge can be seen in the field of agriculture; in practices associated with multi-cropping and seed-production; in the selection and nurturing of appropriate species in forestry; and, it is the bedrock of our herbal system of medicine. This knowledge is also used to organise local associations with broader participation.

Historically this indigenous knowledge has, however, remained limited to the popular form, and is confined to the personal and subjective domains of ordinary citizens who have relied on it for solving their daily problems. With the rise of modern systems of knowledge production and dissemination, more particularly in the guise of the colonial and post-colonial formations, these indigenous knowledge systems became increasingly de-recognised and de-legitimised. What came to be known as 'knowledge' and certified as such, was produced profession-

als in recognised knowledge producing institutions—the universities and colleges. Academia became the centre of knowledge production in the dominant language and represented in a printed form.<sup>2</sup> But a vast section of our population is illiterate, and uses local vernacular languages and expressions in oral folk traditions. Their indigenous knowledge quickly lost ground to this formal, academic, printed knowledge.

**O**ur formal system of democratic governance has relied almost exclusively on this formal system of knowledge. Policies and programmes of development were based on the conclusions of this formal system, further negating and undermining popular and indigenous systems which provided sustenance to local associations. The contradictions and tensions between the systems of formal and academic knowledge and popular, indigenous knowledge get reinforced in the dichotomy between the formal system of democratic governance on the one hand, and the practice of grassroots democracy on the other. The former relied exclusively on the formal system of knowledge in pursuit of its own objectives. The latter (grassroots democracy), by its very nature, continued to work through and rely on indigenous knowledge systems available with the ordinary people at the local level. In fact, the effective and sustained functioning of local associations and the sustenance of grassroots democracy is very closely and intricately linked to the promotion and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems.

We have by now come a full circle. Our policy-makers and leaders in government have gradually begun to appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge system. But this is largely due to the recognition and promotion of such knowledge by international agencies and multinational corporations. The 'worth' of this knowledge, (for example in herbal medicine and biodiversity preservation) has

ironically been reinforced by such global players.

Overall, in its very design, the system of formal democratic governance appears dependent upon a formal knowledge system and does not have much space for recognising and facilitating indigenous knowledge. In contrast, grassroots democracy is reflected in the collective mosaic of citizen associations, local informal institutions and participation of ordinary people in their social and collective life based on their own experiences, norms and values and indigenous system of knowledge that they have acquired over generations. This rich tapestry of local institutions and citizen participation forms the basis of the emergence of *civil society* in a given context: the representation of this associational life and its emergence at the grassroots level.<sup>3</sup>

**N**ot all actors of civil society are necessarily in conformity. By its very nature, various formations and associations in civil society are diverse and, at times in conflict with each other. But it is the vitality, energy and continuity of this associational life, of citizens participation, of local institutions which provides the continuous fuel for grassroots democracy. If our formal system of democratic governance is to serve the larger socio-economic development and interests of our population as a whole, then it must come to terms with these aspects of grassroots democracy. Democracy, therefore, does not merely imply creation and nurturing of a political society where every human being is a member of a political party voting during elections and re-elections at the national and provincial levels. Democracy requires nurturance and growth of civil society, citizen participation and citizen's associations in order to provide a fertile basis for the practice of collective human enterprise in common public good. This is the arena of grassroots democracy; this is the space for citizens participation; this is the playground of civil society.

2. Rajesh Tandon, A Critique of Monopolistic Research, in B. Hall, A. Gillette and R. Tandon (eds.) *Creating Knowledge: A Monopoly*. PRIA, New Delhi, 1982.

3. CIVICUS, Citizens: Strengthening Global Civil Society. First General Assembly Edition, 1995.

# Politics of voluntary action

AJAY S. MEHTA

OUR record of development and democracy presents some paradoxes. Rather than empowering the poor, these forces have, over time, enfeebled them in relation to other social groups in society. While the process of development and poverty alleviation has shifted the balance of power in favour of development functionaries, democracy has attenuated the extent of social cohesion among the rural poor. This paper attempts to describe the efforts of an NGO to counter these debilitating aspects. It also looks at some inner contradictions of voluntary action intended to empower the rural poor. The context is provided by poor tribal peasants living in the hilly tracts of the Aravalli range in the southern part of the state of Rajasthan.

In the post-independence period the Indian state assumed responsibility for enhancing the well-being of rural communities. Over time, a large establishment was created to service the health and schooling needs of communities living in rural areas. As a consequence of public pressure, substantial resources were also

allocated for rural development to alleviate poverty. At the political level, the institution of panchayati raj was created as a people's forum for self-governance and control over the bureaucracy. Despite a significant allocation of resources and creating institutions for self-governance, these interventions have not succeeded in either empowering the poor or enhancing their well-being. If anything, they have strengthened the ability of more powerful and affluent segments of society to control and co-opt the poor.

Prior to independence, this area was ecologically rich and well-endowed with forests. While the feudal system was far from just, the rural people did benefit from access to a well preserved environment. Subsequently, these resources were commercialised which led to their ruthless over-exploitation. The development of an organised industrial sector did not significantly benefit the rural poor because they lacked the social and economic means to take advantage of the opportunities created as a result of national economic growth. Rather than compensate them for destroying the source of their livelihood, the state continued the colonial/feudal policy of a custodial approach to forest and land management. Villagers were denied access and secure entitlements to large

\* This paper is based on field documentation by Anuradha Viswanath and Kavita Gandhi, colleagues in Seva Mandir. For the conceptual framework and analysis I have benefited immensely from discussions with Neelima Khetan and Hem Raj Bhati who are actively involved in implementing Seva Mandir's programmes.

tracts of forest and revenue lands. Instead, land vested in the state was degraded by over-use and was illicitly privatised at the instance of state functionaries and with the support of elected public representatives. This pattern of land tenure and management, while acceptable to the authorities and to villagers who benefited, perversely made the rural people obligated to state officials and politicians.

These arrangements also had an adverse effect on land productivity. Moreover, it led to inter and intra-village conflicts when the process of privatisation overrode the claims of traditional user groups. Since people gained access to resources through patron-client relations and collusive politics, the poor were unable to claim entitlements to public resources in ways that would benefit them. The overall development process led to similar outcomes because the selective and arbitrary provision of state subsidies, bank credits, development projects and so on favoured village groups or individuals.

**T**he overall effect, then, was to weaken the ties of horizontal solidarity among rural people and reinforce vertical ties of dependency with powerful patrons and power brokers. Rather than expanding entitlements to public goods, development and democracy were successful in making people dependent on external patrons whose stake in enhancing the well-being of the poor was anything but positive.

Seva Mandir is a non-government organization (NGO) based in the city of Udaipur. It was founded a little over 25 years ago with the aim of strengthening the poor to help themselves and to provide a forum for citizens to assume greater responsibility for redressing injustices in society. From a small beginning Seva Mandir has grown in size, presently employing 200 full-time members with an annual budget of 37 million rupees. Its central thrust is to promote cooperation among village people as a means of empowering and helping them to become self-reliant.

The experience of two village clusters of the 400 in Seva Mandir's area of

engagement are described below. Their experience is exceptional in terms of the degree of cooperation and political empowerment. The purpose in selecting these villages is to suggest that the principles underlying their transformation apply to the region as a whole.

**N**ayakheda is a hamlet (comprising about 30 households) of the revenue village of Usan, some 30 km north of Udaipur. It is part of a multi-caste village consisting mostly of poor peasants and a small minority of landlords. Seva Mandir worked in this area for over two decades and during the 1970s focussed on adult education and agricultural extension work. Towards the end of the decade it helped villagers form groups to claim their entitlements from the state. Unfortunately, the expectations from group formation and awareness-raising work were not fulfilled. The failure to influence government systems and officials led to a shift in strategy. The focus in the mid 1980s was on creating capacities among local people within Seva Mandir so as to service some of the development needs of the people. The choice of programmes was weighed in favour of cooperative efforts. Despite having created this capacity, given the nature of local politics, no headway was made on development in Nayakheda. The nexus between the local landlord, officials and elected village council representatives was so powerful and self-serving that the poor found no space to undertake development activities with the help of Seva Mandir.

Not only was the local landlord and his coterie resistant to the idea of improving people's lands, but with the connivance of the police and revenue officials he occupied a substantial part of the village pastures for mining purposes. Another segment of the village commons was monopolised by powerful people, thereby creating no stake for the ordinary villager to benefit from or invest in the improvement of these lands. This stand-off in terms of development ended with a bizarre incident in 1990; the landlord and his sons were sent to jail for the suspected murder of 11 people of a family which was

a political and economic competitor. They spent three years in jail before being released by the High Court. It was during the landlord's absence that the people were able to organise themselves to take advantage of the support offered by Seva Mandir. Already familiar with the idea of working as a group, they realised the advantages of being transparent in their dealings with each other and with Seva Mandir. In a short while the situation improved considerably.

The people were able to recover the usurped common lands, though this involved spending large sums of money in courts for disproving the claim of the landlord's family that the land was legally theirs. This success created a social climate for projects addressed to developing the watershed of the area. The villagers were enthusiastic. They felt involved in the planning and execution of these works and felt confident of sharing the final benefit. Even though the remuneration for land development works supported by Seva Mandir was lower than what the government was offering on a World Bank funded project, people chose these works because they were involved in the process of development and felt that Seva Mandir was accountable and accessible to them.

**T**his mobilisation for comprehensive land development involved the entire multi-caste population of seven hamlets consisting of 150 households, including that of Nayakheda. In recovering the village commons from the landlord and successfully challenging the unfair use of common property resources by the powerful, a stake was created among the people to collectively improve productivity of the resource base. Initially, people came together for development works supported by Seva Mandir, but this solidarity subsequently developed a life of its own. This was manifest both at the time of village council elections as also in their daily struggles against the landlord's subsequent efforts to regain control on his release from jail in 1994.

In the early part of 1995, elections to the village councils were held under

the new constitutional amendment. Affirmative action in favour of women and members of the tribal and other disadvantaged groups was introduced for the first time. In Nayakheda, Shiv Lal, a tribal who was associated with Seva Mandir for many years as forestry extension worker, stood for the office of Sarpanch. He was highly respected and popular, given his work in watershed and land development. Though he received offers from the mainstream parties to stand as their candidate, village group members persuaded Shiv Lal to stand as an independent, unattached to any political party.

Shiv Lal had no money for the campaign. Fighting the Congress party and the landlord's candidate appeared a daunting task. The Congress party candidate allegedly spent close to Rs 35,000 in plying voters with gifts and liquor. The local government agricultural supervisor was an active campaigner for the party's candidate. Such partisan behaviour by officials, while forbidden under the service conduct rules, is not uncommon in practice. The group members assured Shiv Lal that they could persuade people to vote for him. They did spend about Rs 2000, raised through voluntary contributions, for hiring transport and buying apples to popularise their election symbol. During the counting, when it was clear that Shiv Lal had won with a large majority, an attempt was made to manipulate the results in favour of the Congress/landlord nominee. But Shiv Lal's supporters were able to thwart these efforts with a display of public strength at the voting centre.

In personal terms, gaining political office has made life difficult for the leaders of the movement as also for the Seva Mandir field workers. They are continuously threatened and harassed. At another level it has resulted in a marked change in power relations. The landlord was prevented from becoming the deputy head of the village council when some of his allies switched allegiance to Shiv Lal's camp. Now there is growing support for a people-based approach to development from the neighbouring villages. People

from distant villages regularly attend the Nayakheda Seva Mandir meetings. Whether this politics of cooperation will survive and grow into a widespread movement is difficult to predict, though the odds are against it. What is clear, however, is that by gaining control of a panchayat, a new phase has begun in terms of the people's political standing and power base.

The experience of another village, Shyampura (consisting of 100 households), located 70 kms south-west of Udaipur city, echoes the Nayakheda experience. It also demonstrates how development efforts are constrained not just by powerful vested interests but by factors internal to the community such as insecure land tenure, lack of cohesion, and an absence of a leadership capable of building consensus among people to promote their common interest.

Seva Mandir started working in Shyampura in 1982 to promote adult literacy among the poor peasants. Later, it encouraged villagers to form groups to lobby for entitlements from the state. A component of the group-building programme encouraged people to take on more responsibility to solve their internal problems. In the mid-1980s, Seva Mandir expanded its role to help service the individual and collective development needs of the villagers.

The lack of an adequate response from the state made Seva Mandir realise that people would lose faith in themselves and in the value of cooperation if there were no positive outcomes. Consequently, the organisation developed a major programme to enable villagers to afforest their degraded private and common lands and build dams to store water which is scarce in the area. In 1987-88, Seva Mandir built a substantial water reservoir in Shyampura village which created goodwill and confidence. It also greatly enhanced the prestige and power of the Shyampura village group and its leaders.

The watershed was highly degraded on one flank, but as it was controlled by the forest department, it was not possible for

the people to prevent siltation of the reservoir. While officially the Forest Act proscribed such public action, individual farmers were able to use the lands for their private benefit with the informal consent of department officials. The most active and influential members of the Shyampura village group themselves encroached on the reservoir's watershed. This undermined their ability to collectively pressure the forest department to check siltation. Such internal contradictions are representative of the social context and thwart sustained public action for securing a broad range of entitlements. Instead, factional strife around lineage, caste, and hamlet affiliations ends up consuming the social energies of the people.

In 1991, the state changed its forest policy. For the first time in a hundred years, local communities were given the right to protect forest land and in return, to share in the benefits generated. This Joint Forest Management policy provided the Shyampura community an opportunity to develop the watershed. After elaborate preparations, a contract was signed between the forest department and an elected committee representing the community to improve 50 ha of the watershed. The leaders of the group who stood to lose access to lands they had encroached upon in the watershed agreed to this venture. In return they extracted a promise that Seva Mandir would build a lift irrigation system downstream. The decision to convert forest land into a joint property of the village was initially not appreciated by all the villagers. People from the neighbouring village of Amlia began to make encroachments when they heard about the signing of the JFM contract. After protracted efforts by Seva Mandir and the Shyampura group to resolve the conflicts and doubts among the potential stake holders, the project made headway.

These developments set the stage for a political transformation of the area, similar in some respects to that of Nayakheda. Prior to the village council election of 1995, the BJP, approached



Nathu Lal, a leader of the Shyampura group, to be its nominee as head of the village council. Nathu had earlier made two unsuccessful attempts to secure the post. While confident of winning the rural vote, he was insecure of the urban support base, which is why he needed the BJP. This strategy succeeded and for the first time in five decades the Congress candidate in the area lost the election. From all accounts, Nathu was perceived by the people as capable of ensuring broad-based cooperation. Now that he holds elected office and commands authority, his rural supporters expect him to facilitate the development of common property resources and make government functionaries more accountable to the people.

**T**here is evidence of growing interest in cooperation among the people and a disenchantment with the patronage mode of seeking individual benefits. This trend also seems to invite a reciprocal interest from leaders like Nathu to reinforce cohesion and community based approaches to development. In April 1995, after the panchayat elections, people from four villages in this area came together to declare about 700 ha of forest land as sacred in order to prevent encroachment and over-exploitation.

After the elections, the more powerful members of the community demonstrated a commitment to promoting solidarity when Nathu and some members of his clan agreed to make an annual contribution to the village fund from the additional earnings expected from the lift irrigation scheme. This scheme had caused resentment in a neighbouring hamlet as the people there felt left out. The gesture to contribute to the fund was both to make amends and to cement ties of solidarity. These events at a micro level, while small in scale, suggest that it is possible to challenge the politics of control.

The ability of people to work in cooperation has so far been critically dependent on the interventions of Seva Mandir. Mainstream structures of development are not designed to provide people a stake in coming together and to help them service their own development

needs. However, in an NGO the size of Seva Mandir, the agenda of empowering the poor generates strong internal contradictions. The experience of the organisation over two decades of functioning shows a tendency for staff members to form small groups to serve their narrow interest at the expense of the poor.

**P**eople working at the grassroots, at modest levels of remuneration often lose heart in the difficult enterprise of people's empowerment. This is not surprising. Before sharing power and authority with the poor, they first need to have a sense of self-worth, something that society hardly prepares them for. Their self-confidence is undermined as jobs commensurate with their expectation and social needs are hard to come by. As they realise the value of their skills and ideas, it slowly helps develop pride in their work. We must realise that the paraworkers' psychological and cultural need to exercise power and patronage is similar to those with similar background in government. Changing this orientation will take time. Meanwhile, it is important to ensure that the organisation builds strong systems of accountability and shares power with the poor.

Seva Mandir's experiment of establishing a cadre of village-based professionals trained to serve the needs of the community shows some promise. These salaried workers have a long term stake in serving the community. They are accountable to the village group, though in practice this will happen when the group experiences the value of coming together and exercising control over their representatives. These village paraworkers are expected to grow into leadership roles and develop the confidence to hold the institution accountable. Not to have secure and well-informed people among the poor will only centralise leadership roles outside the community. The newly elected public representatives in Nayakheda and Shyampura are both paraworkers – Shiv Lal in forestry and Nathu in literacy. 700 such trained villagers exist in Seva Mandir's area of operation. Leadership is one of the most critical factors

in the change process. Providing exposure and financial security to village people has allowed those with leadership skills to become closely associated with development works that serve the interests of the poor.

Within Seva Mandir there is an attempt to decenter authority and create multiple centres of initiative. All the operational units of Seva Mandir – forestry, women's work, health, literacy – are required to develop direct links with the rural people and create an organisational structure for villagers to service their own development needs. This system, besides making villages self-reliant in skills, will also encourage multiple points of contact between the village people and the organisation, thereby fostering a two-way flow of information.

**T**he need for ensuring transparency in relations between the NGO and villagers, and within the NGO is equally critical. This is difficult to achieve. Elaborate financial procedures, hierarchy in management levels and multiple centres of initiative are often alibis for inaction. If openness and transparency are promoted and initiative encouraged at all levels, these values gradually become internalised. In fact, there is resistance should these values be violated.

The experiences of Nayakheda and Shyampura suggest that NGOs have a role to play in empowering people. NGOs involved in development for engendering social cohesion can help people to gain political power. In India, while development and democracy have not served the interests of the poor, they do provide space where power is contested and these very forces turned to their advantage. Institutions of civil society like Seva Mandir have a role to play in changing the circumstances of the poor, specially since they themselves can, with some support, become the custodians of their own interest. The challenge for NGOs is to overcome their own internal contradictions and keep pace with people at the grassroots who can show the way to empowerment, provided others in society are willing to cooperate.

# The neo-missionaries

SRILATA SWAMINADHAN

BEFORE discussing to the role of NGOs it is necessary to first understand what is meant by development or Developmentalism with a capital D. It is all too apparent in today's world that the evolution of all societies, all progress and reform is being forced into one mould, one methodology and one process of evaluation. There seems to be just one world outlook being thrust upon all countries and societies and all are being judged and measured by this one paradigm. As Wolfgang Sachs remarks, we are living in the Age of Development.

Developmentalism is a post Second World War phenomenon. It evolved at a time when old forms of imperialism and methods of direct enslavement of colonies were no longer viable and new methods of indirect colonisation had to be found. The USA, at the height of its power and industrial productivity, sought to consolidate its world hegemony with a new economic-philosophical paradigm with the main aims of:

a) providing a capitalist alternative to the communist world outlook and eliminating the need for revolution;

b) appearing to tackle poverty and inequalities, thus showing that capitalism had a humane and caring face and was not merely a profit-making machine; and  
c) pushing through a uniform set of world reforms that not only increased the hold of the advanced nations over the rest of the world but also increased the dependency of the latter on the former. In other words, a method by which they could carry on their control and plunder of the world's resources and people.

This new development model, packaged and launched in 1949 by President Truman, divided the world into developed and underdeveloped nations. The rest of the world was taught that it was imperative that they escape the dishonour and shame of underdevelopment by aspiring to all that the developed nations had achieved. This was possible only by emulating the latter and being directed, controlled and 'assisted' by them.

It was argued that as societies evolved, some became more advanced and some less so. The developed societies were more advanced because they had the advantage of scientific and techno-

logical skill, industry, and knowledge which the underdeveloped lacked. But, so the argument went, there was no reason why the underdeveloped could not catch up with the rich nations if they did as they were told and agreed to being directed and guided by the latter. This compliance by the poorer nations was ensured through the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund and so on) who through their aid, loans and through the process of developmentalism gradually robbed each nation of independent initiative. Further, through increasing indebtedness they tied the poor nations to the rich more surely than any direct conquest could ever have done.

This new form of enslavement was made all the more dangerous, given the appearance of freedom and democracy in each country. It saved the rich nations from the stigma of imperialism. It also helped the ruling elite of the third world countries to cover up their abject surrender and their collusion in the plunder of their own countries.

**I**n this new global philosophy there was no place for arguments such as underdevelopment is the result of development, nor for unpalatable truths such as the scientific and technological advancement of the West is based on almost five hundred years of plunder and colonisation of Asia, Africa and South America (the underdeveloped world), a plunder which is still going on under the benign garb of developmentalism.

After nearly fifty years of developmentalism there is little doubt about whom this model really benefits. So, while in the 1960s the rich nations were only 20 times richer than the poor, by the 1980s they are over 46 times richer. Though the population of the US and Europe is only 20% of the total world population, it consumes over 80% of world resources. To understand just how lucrative developmentalism is for the rich nations, let us look at these figures: From 1982 to 1990, total resources flowing from the North to the South were \$927 billion. In the same period, the poor South paid the rich North over \$1345 billion in

debt service alone! The plunder of the South in this era of neo-colonialism is too well documented to be seriously questioned.

It is clear that the main beneficiaries of developmentalism have therefore not been the peoples of the South but the rich, advanced nations and the ruling elite of the underdeveloped nations. It must be remembered that all development is US-Eurocentric and provides just one solution to the problems of all nations, no matter how disparate. It also displays no regard for different cultures, nationalities, values or religions, all of which have been uniformly eroded by the dominant culture of the West, particularly the US.

**I**n effect, the entire pattern of development is totally undemocratic because all developmental standards are framed by the US. Any country which stands up to them is automatically blacklisted. Therefore, no matter how advanced Cuba's education and medical systems may be, or how progressive Libya's housing policies may be, these are never considered as development successes worth emulating. In the same way, no matter how destructive the policies of the IMF-WB – be it big dams, the green revolution or structural adjustments, they have been forced onto one suffering nation after another and projected as the panacea for all socio-economic ills. There is no choice in the matter.

Where ever these prescriptions of structural adjustment and development models have been implemented, the same devastating effects have been noticed: growing unemployment as wealth gets increasingly concentrated in the hands of the rich, deteriorating human rights due to greater economic tensions and pressures on the poor, inflation and soaring prices and the most indiscriminate and unsustainable rape of natural resources – forests, mines and minerals, seas, lakes and rivers – leading to irreversible environmental damage in which thousands have lost their homes and livelihood.

The only nations which are recognised as being democratic are ones that

open up their country to every TNC or MNC, permit the indiscriminate plunder of their natural resources and allow every type of imported goods to be dumped on their markets. Hence, undemocratic governments such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kuwait and Indonesia are considered good friends of the West. Their human rights credentials are never called into question, no matter how many Kurds, Timorese and so on are slaughtered by them or how they strangle all freedom of thought, speech and movement in their own countries. So long as they import Coca Cola and build golf courses, they are considered democratic. It is thus amply clear that terms like development and democracy are loaded with double standards and doublespeak.

In itself, this doublespeak is not new. It was used by the earlier imperialists when they talked of 'taking light to the dark continent', 'civilising the barbarian' and bringing Christianity to the heathens and savages in order to justify and cover up their rapacious colonisation. Our current masters too, use such euphemisms as democracy, development and a unified global order to justify present day neo-colonialism.

**N**ow that one has briefly tried to explain what development is all about, let us examine the role of NGOs. The earlier missionaries played a crucial role in the opening up of countries for imperialist expansion, in manipulating the minds of those they wished to conquer so that the new values of the conqueror would be more readily accepted and in winning over or co-opting the elite in the newly opened colonies who would emulate and blindly serve their imperialist masters. Similarly today, in this era of neo-colonialism, we see the same role being played by the neo-missionaries, the NGOs. They have served to push through the ethos and philosophy of capitalist developmentalism with just as much dedication, commitment and smugness as the Christian missionaries displayed in pushing through imperial colonisation.

The term NGO (non-government organisation) is a misnomer and can be

extremely misleading because any organisation which is not a government organisation can be covered by this term including political parties, trade unions and mass organisations. Here the term NGO only refers to that genre of organisations – registered societies, charitable trusts and so on which have no existence of their own but depend for their existence on national and international funding institutions. This breed of organisations also goes by the name of voluntary organisations, another misnomer, as anything less voluntary is hard to imagine. They take substantial salaries for their ‘voluntary’ work and should their sources of funds dry up, one can safely say that of the lakhs of such parasitic organisations dotting our country today, only a mere handful would carry on their work.

**I**t must be remembered that these organisations have been created and are kept alive (with funds) by the global ruling elite. They have been created with the specific task of pushing through developmentalism. Their doublespeak comes across loud and clear. They profess to be working for the eradication of poverty when they are totally dependent for their existence on precisely those classes and social forces which are responsible for poverty, exploitation and the appallingly inequitable distribution of wealth and resources.

In over twenty years of experience of working in the rural areas of Rajasthan there has been enough of opportunity to study the negative aspects of the developmentalism that NGOs have been able to push through. The most noticeable of these are:

1. The linking of every village and individual to a centralised market economy and to ever growing consumerism.
2. The systematic destruction of all self-reliant, sustainable and traditional practices such as indigenous medicines, herbs, agricultural practices, crafts, cattle-breeding and so on, and their replacement by questionable forms of development with high overheads, wasteful patterns of consumption and a growing dependency

of the people on forces outside their control.

3. Greater economic disparities with more wealth in fewer hands. The increasing inequalities in landholding patterns is a clear example.

4. Since developmentalism is so highly centralised and top-to-bottom, it is a readymade weapon in the hands of vested interests to be used in favour of some and withheld from others. It becomes a tool for manipulating people by governments and even international forces who are politically motivated.

5. Rural-urban contradictions and exploitation have increased with a greater one-way drain of rural resources. All patterns of development implemented in the rural areas are basically guided by a philosophy of benefiting the urban. This urbo-centric development finances and encourages only those rural products or ‘cash crops’ that serve urban needs.

6. The natural leaders in the communities have been steadily co-opted, incorporated in a system that channelises their functioning in ways that help the ruling elite and their international masters and ensures that they pose no challenge to the existing state of affairs.

7. Many positive aspects of local culture and values have been severely eroded. Because most development values are alien and forced onto societies from the outside, inner strengths of decision-making are being lost and internal processes of change are being smothered by the thinking, theorising, paradigms and implementation of ideas foisted onto people who have been converted to passive recipients of various schemes.

8. A type of non-party politics has emerged at the grassroots level, encouraged by social work organisations with massive funding trying to inculcate a disdain for political processes. This suits their rich national and international donors who will not have to face any political threat from the people they are working with. This has generated a great deal of confusion among the people so that forming genuine mass movements and organisations has been made just that much more difficult. This stance also

helps NGOs have their cake and eat it too, as they can take a ‘political’ stance without upsetting either their governments or their donors.

9. Another serious fallout of developmentalism is the deliberate manner in which economic power is being separated from political power. The advantage of doing this is that political power can be deemed to have been given to the people but since it is devoid of any real economic clout it remains nothing but a sham. The present instances of panchayati raj and women sarpanches are good examples.

10. Most NGOs only implement those projects and schemes that international agencies have already chalked out. They blindly implement the IMF-WB recipes for progress which are the same, be it in Papua New Guinea or in Pali district. Those NGOs who attempt a more independent or principled stand have gradually been marginalised and have lost all sources of funds. In fact, NGOs have limited freedom and have to fall in line or face the consequences. Very few have the courage to do this.

11. Another disturbing aspect of NGOs is their lack of accountability and transparency in functioning. As Susan George says, ‘If they make a mess of a development project, they will not be there to see it and they can walk away from their victims, towards the next disaster.’ There is an absence of ethical norms governing them by which they can be brought to book. Even such professions as lawyers, doctors and journalists are more accountable.

**T**he most damning indictment that NGOs and developmentalism (and all their supporters) face is that in spite of the billions of dollars spent over the past thirty or forty years why are the problems increasing? Why, in spite of all official statistics, are there more poor? Why are the poor nations losing their natural wealth at faster rates? Why is ecological and environmental damage becoming irreversible? This is the real charge against developmentalism and neo-missionaries.

# A memory for democracy

KRISHNA KUMAR

WHAT remains of Manibeli was the venue of our meeting. The rest, including the ancient shrine of Shulpaneshwar stands under the vast, stationary body of water that the river Narmada has become as a result of the half-built Sardar Sarovar dam. While crossing the deep reservoir our motorboat had nearly touched the top of the khirni tree standing beside the shrine.

The meeting had begun late after that long day was fully over. Among us were people who had spent many years worrying about children's education in India. Manibeli was also in India, but on its way to drowning in order to enable India to prosper. Before its final disappearance it had brought us together to discuss the future of eight schools running in the valley. These schools have been named *jeevanshalas* or schools of life; it is a precise descriptor, but it also sounds like a slogan shouted by a soldier in trouble. We had assembled to talk about ways in which these schools might be made more functional, perhaps more creative, and their number might go up. We had spent the first, short session in the night introducing ourselves. Apart from us, the outsiders, there were the voluntary teachers working in the *jeevanshalas*, and some thirty fathers of the children and other senior members of Manibeli and its neighbouring villages.

Next morning we wanted to start early, but I got delayed by the temptation to take an elaborate dip. There were reluctant raindrops in the air which was gently lit by the August sun from behind a thick roof of monsoon clouds. My teenage son had found an attractive and convenient inlet of the gigantic lake: you could hardly call it a part of the river. The water was muddy brown, but the teak forest all around us was dark green. Its tall, pervasive presence on the Satpura hills was reassuring – that for a full half-hour

one could ignore the overdue fate of summary destruction of this entire milieu. The Maharashtra government had recently burnt a vast area of teak to clear the official way for submergence. Such heartrending news and whatever else was happening the wide world over left us alone for a while as we immersed ourselves in water and sat there clinging to it like babes to amniotic fluid.

When I did join the meeting I discovered I had missed the start almost entirely. A small fire was burning in the middle, otherwise the room was quite dark. Someone was talking about curriculum. For most teachers in India the question means whether they will use the textbooks prescribed by the state or some other books. In our rigid system, the question is a symbol of a much wider set of questions and choices. It is like the peon sitting on a wooden chair outside a dingy office; before you know what is happening, he directs you to a desk irrelevant for your problem, and the fellow sitting there directs you to the next, and so on till you survey more or less the entire office and still feel clueless.

A question focusing on choice in curricular matters inevitably leads to the terrible question of examination and certification, teachers' freedom and finally, to the terrible question of educational aims. After a few minutes of thought about the aims of education you know how foolish you are being, for it is not the aims of education but the aims lurking in the world around us and waiting to seduce our children which bind education to society. This wisdom directs you to talk about the future of the children you are concerned with, or rather their social destiny. As soon as you direct your attention that way, the house of educational philosophy begins to shake a little, just as it did for Mannheim early in the century. He had noticed that the social destiny of a child is not shaped by education alone, and certainly not by the fine choices made by psychologists

\* This article is excerpted from the author's forthcoming book, *A Reason for Narmada*.



and pedagogues in the course of designing the curriculum.

There is something called historical forces that we learn to disaggregate slowly as we get older, rather differently from how we had learnt to disaggregate them during our training in social analysis. It is when economy and politics, culture and history start to hurt your skin that you know your knowledge and training were of little use, that having a room for the unexpected equips you best to cope with life. Then you wonder why education had to be so tightly rational, why could it not permit some space for love to shine and show the way years later.

**A**s I sat in that dark room on a hill with 50 people discussing education in a village awaiting its end, I knew that our deliberations would get messy and suffocating. At such moments I try to remind myself of some platitudes about education. As platitudes always do, these too are bland, full of hope-giving triteness. You need a philosopher like Dewey to make them profound or a poet like Tagore to make them colourful. Here they are, all four of them: one, education is a social institution, it socialises and thereby binds us together; two, it gives a memory, and not just a personal dream; three, it builds self-esteem and confidence; four, it refines sensibility and nurtures the desire to be creative in whatever one does. As a teacher of educational theory I know it is always wiser to add a 'should' in all of these statements, for the simple reason that education quite often fails to do all this; in the case of the last two platitudes, it often ends up doing the opposite. Despite this problem the statements are useful, for they help you steer your mind in demanding situations.

Right then, even as I was mentally reciting my four-verse mantra, the discussion entered, almost without anyone noticing, a deep, pitch-dark whirlpool. Before long it was obvious that none of us had the wherewithal to retrieve any educational thought or decisions out of that whirlpool. I have known since I was a child that it is not possible to come out alive from a dark whirlpool. A handsome,

young doctor and his son were caught in one which was under a majestic building our king had built to keep it cool. It was an uncanny construction, of the kind Bundela kings were fond of building for their entertainment, and this was meant to serve as a club where the town's elite played ping-pong and badminton on the main floor while the pool in the basement kept them cool. The light ping-pong ball drifted away from its desired trajectory that evening and bounced towards the stairs that led to the basement where the dark pool of water was. According to folklore, a strong current flowed through that pool all the time. The doctor's son ran to catch the ball, and that day the door at the bottom of the stairs was open. When the boy did not come back, the father went in. It was hours before their bodies were taken out. Our little town was numb for days.

I know when that kind of scene is about to unfold in any story. It encircled our meeting when one of the senior residents of Manibeli asked us to tell him before we talk about children's education what we thought about the mass of grief that had befallen the village. Then he became more specific and asked: were we talking about education in the context of a completed Sardar Sarovar, which would mean the end of Manibeli and this community, or did we have some hope that the Sardar Sarovar project might be cancelled?

**T**he question was posed so artlessly that it did not register on many in the first instance, but then, someone else repeated it in somewhat different words. Many more voices then revised it and filled the room so thoroughly with its pointed grip that no one could hope to escape it. If the dam was going to be completed and the villages of the valley were going to break up, first into dozens of rehabilitation sites and then, eventually, into a hundred urban slums, then there was little point talking about how to make the jeevanshailas more efficient.

In January 1996, in a Bombay magazine called *Humanscape*, Nityanand Jayaraman had written about the plight of the rehabilitated residents of Vadgam. On

our way to Manibeli we had passed over this village, now under sixty feet or probably more of the reservoir's water. No one could see anything, but there it was – all that one calls life's gear – far below our boat's bottom. Vadgam was the first village to drown as it was nearest to the dam. The government had seventeen years to fulfil its promises to the residents. Nityanand Jayaraman writes: 'Around 1979 the government through NGOs informed the villagers that they were free to choose the land of their liking to resettle. But every time we chose a site, the sarkar said, "That's too expensive for you," says Shankarbhai (a resident of Vadgam). Eventually, the 764-household village was splintered into 40 groups and carted off to various sites spread across at least two districts in Gujarat.'

**V**adgam resettlement is cited by the Gujarat government as an example of its successful rehabilitation programme. Shankarbhai and many others tried returning to their submerged village site, higher up on the Vindhya slope where it stands revealed in the dry season. In 1994 they were evicted by some 700 policemen to a site called Dharampuri, which is how Jayaraman got the title of his article, 'The Saga of Dharampuri'.

As far as I know, there is no educational theory which places education in the frame of charity and isolates it from the human craving for justice. Even the most conservative among liberal theorists agree that the hope of justice is what arouses the deepest sources of motivation for making the effort that any education requires. Now someone can argue that the desire for justice is a part of human nature, that all men and women possess it by the virtue of being human, so why do we need to relate it to education to the extent that an educational effort might seem unworthy of making if there is no hope of justice in a specific context? It is an interesting argument, but it fails to classify the desire for justice.

For the overwhelming majority of the earth's human population in known history, the after-life has presented the hope of justice far in excess of life in this

world. The image and role of God as the only one capable of doing full justice have not blurred much in our century which otherwise takes pride in spoiling God's name and fame. Justice which only God can provide has no relevance for education unless we agree to reduce the meaning of education to solace. The platitudes I listed earlier prohibit such reduction. If education is to give a memory and a dream, self-esteem and sensibility, it cannot be defined as a means of seeking solace which is what the hope of justice after death is all about. Indeed, the whole point about education being so important to democracy is that it kindles, under favourable circumstances, the hope of secular justice in a distributive sense.

**T**his role of education is so clearly established in democratic theory that I need not waste any space discussing it. I want to move on to a point which, I believe, has received scant attention, and which relates to the memory-giving role of education. It interests me greatly how a community capable of remembering influences the functioning of democratic institutions set up to provide distributive justice.

Let me get back to the first platitude which describes education as a social institution and suggests that its primary function is to socialise. This idea was imprinted on the theory of education by Durkheim who, Raymond Aaron has noted, was every year 'condemned to teach a course in education.' He was writing against a background in which several important institutions of European society were facing the strain of scientific rationalism and of material prosperity brought about by industrial production. Durkheim noted how important education was for constituting the 'social being' in every individual, making the individual capable of sharing the beliefs and practices, traditions and collective opinions which have sustained the group in the past. Socialisation describes the subtle and varied means by which the group obtains over a course of time the growing individual's tacit consent in these beliefs and practices.

As this description suggests, education can be expected to serve this kind of socialising function only in the context of a continuous community. A group of people which has a past but no probable future can hardly hope to socialise its children into modes of cognizing the world which reflect the beliefs and practices sustaining the group. Such beliefs include the belief in the group's own identity. It needs little imagination to predict that the village communities about to be forced to disperse from the Narmada valley cannot fulfil the responsibility of socialising their children. We know from the experience of communities broken apart at Hirakud, Rihand, Singrauli, Bargi and hundreds of such locations that the Narmada communities have no reason to expect their future as communities. They will die of dispersal. Many readers, socialised by earlier readings on the Narmada problem, might smell as anti-development the agenda in my writing; this would surely be a misleading smell, for I am talking about details of a kind rather different from the ones development planners and commentators bear in mind.

**W**hat will happen to the unsocialised children of Manibeli and other villages of the Narmada valley? Those who have tried to calculate say that some 3 crore people have been removed from their ancestral milieux as a result of dams alone since independence. The Narmada plan of dams of various sizes will affect about 1.5 crores. The Bargi dam alone, completed about seven years ago near the source of the Narmada, drowned some 162 villages. Destruction of communities on such a vast scale should by now have generated at least a few good studies of the unsocialised young.

There must be several good reasons for their absence; one which I find quite plausible has to do with the temptation that 'socialisation' as a term arouses to treat it in a flexible manner. For example, one may be tempted to use it for the impact of any milieu on the child, including the milieu of a resettlement camp. This would be a sad misuse of the word, particularly in relation to education. Milieux or sur-

roundings do not socialise; an ethos does. An ethos reflects the spirit and belief-sets which characterise a community's pattern of life. If a man-made calamity destroys a community by breaking it up, its ethos cannot be reassembled with the help of rehabilitational trivia.

**L**ast year's Unicef report on the state of the world's children is useful because it helps us recognise such trivia without humiliating it, for like charity, it deserves respectful mention in records of human endeavour. The report notes the mental wounds that violence and displacement caused by war inflict on children, and supports the need for 'psychological rebuilding'. The report does not hide the banality of the 'expression activities' – singing, dancing, drama, drawing and writing – organized by functionaries trained to heal the mentally wounded in Rwanda and Bosnia.

I have no training in this kind of thing, but I was once faced with a child who had spent the first seven years of his life in a brutal world. I know a sample of one has no scientific standing, but it was as much as I could take to absorb the news of the unsocialised which keeps pouring in through the cracks of democracy.

No scolding or punishment ever made a difference to him. It took me a little while to realise that he had no tears inside him. Probably his father was also waiting to see one before he might make up his mind to stop beating the boy every now and then. I was frightened by the fact that stories read aloud to him never lit up his face; no ending brought relief; no plot was thick enough to evoke tension or suspense. The boy seemed like a personalised challenge to me, sent to shake up my storytelling orthodoxy. I have hung on to my faith despite my failure with this boy's depths, for stories did manage to give him some reliable reading ability. Poetry fared worse. No amount of singing, even with rudimentary beats generated with his help, brought the sense of rhythm back from the shores of neglect and violence where he had lost it.

Having some sense of rhythm is primary to organising the inner world,

especially for nurturing in it the relationship between purpose and time, howsoever small its units. This boy's contact with words was brittle; they broke before they might evoke an image or feeling. He looked normal, otherwise; in fact, smart and a little stout for a boy not yet eight. The fact is he was not an extreme case; his family's migration to a Delhi slum had not involved the loss of a linguistic inheritance, for example. But then, preservation of a linguistic heritage is one thing for an enumerator or academic observer, quite another for a child who lives that heritage in a world which does not echo it, for it cannot, because the sounds of destitution are so loud all around.

**W**hen we destroy a community by uprooting it in order to use the land vacated by it for economic growth of the nation, we necessarily destroy many of the resources it takes human beings to survive as people. These sources are so intertwined with cognitive processes and with the drive for survival that we cannot distinguish them as items on a checklist without making our task look a little ridiculous. This is because the moment you start to separate them as, for example, language, mythology and so on, you seem to suggest as if these strands of life can be rescued in isolation. We feel understandably weary when we see someone preparing such a list, even if it is for the sake of showing what all is about to be destroyed. Friends who have the courage to speak of alternative development in the midst of relentless development often exhaust what interest their audience might possess by doing this kind of listing in an earnest manner.

I suppose part of the weariness in such situations also arises from our prior knowledge of the overarching character of democracy in our country as it has evolved in the last five decades. This experience shows democracy to have been a great and attractive cover story. The story of how a democratic nation arose out of the blood and ashes of partition has digested every possible short story of grief. All such stories have a local habitation, whereas democracy always

appears as an aggregate. In the construction of democracy, its heroes and their deeds, every higher neglect of anxiety and details of suffering seems to have eaten up the one preceding it, as if the system got successively emboldened. It has been like news headlines pushing out yesterday's horror into the backyard of stale news. So, the big story of agricultural self-sufficiency has swallowed up the stories of small peasants and tribal communities rendered homeless. Added up, these latter stories would make too tedious an account indeed.

Watch a district headquarter in relation to the countryside which surrounds it, and you will see how the extractive rights of the democratic state have grown far in excess of its developmental duties. Each enclosure of material prosperity is served at hopelessly inadequate rates by a vast hinterland. I come from one, which is nothing special – it is a matter of degree – for we all belong to one vast hinterland called India. My district sends men and women as labourers to Malwa, Haryana and Delhi, soapstone to Europe and Japan where they turn it into expensive cosmetics, and soyabean to mills in Kanpur and Raipur from where the soya cake proceeds to the United States where they feed it to pigs and cattle before slaughtering them for meat. One has to be a dunce to believe that my district has any real prospect of development, with or without education.

**D**emocracy for us means electing an XYZ who will not come in the way of extraction of our district's resources for poor returns. One form of return is the investment made by the government in the rural hinterland. According to the estimate made by a committee of the Madhya Pradesh government, the rural population receives just one rupee for every thirty rupees invested in town areas. The town area in our district is limited; all important politicians have their roots in the countryside. Yet no one speaks of the unequal relationship in which rural parts of the district are placed in the context of the town area, and in which the district as a whole is placed with reference to the state and

the country. They can hardly be described as architects of our doom; they are merely custodians of peace necessary for extraction, and the smart ones among them charge a heavy honorarium for this role.

**O**ne evening when the International Trade Fair held every November in New Delhi's Pragati Maidan was in its final, peak bustle, I met a woman from home. She was thin, and looked tired from lifting boxes of some heavy metallic machinery on display in the Maharashtra pavilion. I recognized her by the way she was sitting in the ample lawns maintained in Pragati Maidan to relieve the exhausted visitor. I know that style of sitting. I sometimes meet labourers from my part of the country in the university where I teach. The men drive cycle rickshaws, carrying young women to a nearby bazaar which now features the United Colours of Benetton and Baskin and Robbins. The women break stones for the construction of this or that annexe. These women apparently come from remote corners of the district where the pioneering efforts of my mother to spread education never reached.

I often ask her what difference these efforts made, and her reply always singles out a beneficiary widow who got a job, a clerk's daughter who became a doctor, and so on. Individual mobility in a stable structure is all that education achieved, we might say if we follow my mother's retrospect. She is certain that education has made no difference to voting behaviour. The view of my election expert friends and now the staple of media commentary, that Indian voters have matured, strikes my mother as a hoax.

The debate reminds me of a point made by Lee-Warner in his 1897 book, *The Citizen of India*, which was listed as a school textbook of civics for many years. Written in order to instil school boys with the hope that they will 'value their heritage of British citizenship', the book argues that although 87% of India's children are not at school, 'it must not be supposed that a man learns nothing except at school.' Lee-Warner tells the story of a Brahmin official, a Parsi lawyer and a

Muslim trader travelling on the day a breach had occurred on the Bombay-Poona line. Seeing a repair train-load of workers go by, the Muslim stated, 'The public works of India are the best school in India,' meaning that the British way of mobilising and organizing labour is an education for Indians. I recognize an echo of Lee-Warner whenever I hear that the repeated experience of elections and the conduct of elections have made the Indian voter responsible and perceptive.

**I**t will take the potion of justice with memory to dissolve the oxymoron of democracy grounded in illiteracy. If we now decide to recognize education as a priority for democracy, we must be prepared with a story to tell, both to the children of Manibeli and all others too, including our own. The story must acknowledge the record of victimisation and neglect. Such a story alone can socialise over a long run the victims and the actors of past progress together in a modicum of togetherness democracy desperately needs for survival. Without an acknowledgement of the wrong, our collective redemption cannot even begin, though we cannot be certain about what it will mean to live through once it has begun.

Democracy requires sharing of material and cultural resources, including negative cultural resources like guilt. Quite a few European democracies have not yet come to terms with the guilt of colonisation. And America continues to consciously deprive its children of the knowledge of the unsuccessful attempt made by their ancestors to exterminate the native population. It is rather ironical that reluctance to come to terms with the past should characterise education in a country whose philosopher Dewey defined historical knowledge as a means of 'socialized intelligence'. The enormity of inner tension that American society copes with in the context of its black and remaining native populations can hardly be judged by us. All we know is that heaps of wealth and power have proved inadequate to ease that tension, so it erupts in a hundred blisters daily.

For us the choice and the time available are hardly unlimited. Busy in nation-building, successive governments have failed to register the impact that destruction of communities have had on the ethos of the nation. Victimisation of the tribal took place as a matter of routine because their habitats had a savoury potential for extraction through mining and the generation of electricity. Constitutionally identified as people with special rights, the tribals have formed the near-total majority in many cases of uprootment mainly because of their geographical misfortune. Residents of the Narmada valley are among the most recent in the long list of tribal communities which perished in the course of progress made by the nation. We fool ourselves if we believe that the dissonance caused by the death of each community dies after some time. It actually gets louder as time passes and makes an increasingly enfeebling, exhausting impact on the nerves of democratic governance.

**E**ducation can offer some help for containing the dissonance, but to offer this help education must involve a memory-imparting agenda. This agenda is also essential for some other roles of education which I mentioned earlier in my listing of useful platitudes. The memory of having been wronged is important for the recovery of self-esteem lost in the course of defeat and repression. The memory and awareness of wrongdoing are known to provide at least some depth to the sensibility of classes preoccupied with enjoying themselves. For the dispossessed, memory of the wrong constitutes both an acknowledgement and a ground for the assertion of one's right for justice with a record. Distributive justice without a time dimension is no better than solace, for it cannot alter the structures of continuous advantage wrongfully gained. Awareness of the past has the capacity to imbue distributive justice with a redemptive agenda. Education which might impart such awareness cannot alter the extractive character of the state, but it might slow down the machine.

# Lessons from Bhopal

SANJOY HAZARIKA

IN the early hours of 3 December 1984, a huge surge of chemical gases burst out of the tanks storing the lethal methyl isocyanate at the Union Carbide subsidiary plant at Bhopal. A deadly cloud of gas swamped the nearby colonies, killing people as they slept, overwhelming them as they ran in terror from the unknown killer.

The gases spared none: men, women or children, young or old, rich or poor. And those who survived—and who suffered lung and eye damage at the time as well as psychological trauma—continue to suffer in a never-ending round of trips for medical check-ups, medicines, courts and compensation.

The tragedy of the event brings to mind what Edmund Burke said: 'An event has happened upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to be silent.' Yet, more than 12 years after the disaster, Bhopal appears to have recovered, at least on the surface. Its old city throbs with life, the markets are full, the streets are busy and crowded and scores of new stores and businesses have sprung up.

These are good signs of the strength underpinning our society. But this is no indication that the issues that were raised by the tragedy have been tackled or resolved. One does not want to focus here on the unending tangle of compensation and interim relief but on other questions, particularly those related to technological hazards and control, industrial safety and emergency preparedness.

Throughout this century, chemical technologies including medicines, which were to make the world a better and safer place, appear to have done at least partly just the opposite. Take the cases of DDT,

dioxin and the thalidomide babies. If the remark by a top executive at a chemical giant, 'Without chemicals, life would be impossible' sounds glib these days, it is because the world is increasingly questioning the limits of technology, particularly its safety. The trade-off between danger and development is no longer regarded as an acceptable risk.

One cannot overlook the benefits of fertilisers, pesticides and other chemicals; they have contributed enormously to increasing food production. But in the bargain, the earth itself has been poisoned, often irreparably.

'To the dismay of statisticians, when natural and man-made threats are ranked for danger by average citizens, those made by man always seem more threatening than those arising from nature,' says Richard Parker.

To consider these and related questions, one proposes to assess the impact of the Bhopal event on the United States and India.

How did the United States, the 'home country' of Union Carbide, react to the tragedy? Did it influence laws and public opinion? More importantly, did it change the way industry operated? What role did the media play in these changes?

It is important to see Bhopal in its international environmental setting. In 1962 the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson heralded a spurt in environmental activism. Carson's classic work emphasised the impact of pesticides on human, animal, plant and bird life, and on the soil. Then came the Minamata mercury poisoning case in Japan that forced them to set up a Pollution Control Board. The incident involved the dump-



ing of mercury into the Minamata Bay by a Japanese company, in the process poisoning marine life and the people who ate fish from the Bay. Compensation was paid to the victims only after a lengthy court battle.

This was followed by the first world conference on the environment in 1972 at Stockholm. It assessed the threats to our planet and many countries agreed to set up pollution control agencies. In 1976 a dioxin leak from a Hoffman-La Roche subsidiary in Italy, led to the evacuation of more than 700 people and caused the deaths of domestic animals. Though compensation was paid, it was only much later that the European Community developed the Seveso Directive which laid down rules for member states on preventing industrial accidents and limiting damage. It also defined hazardous substances, classified them and recommended storage levels for different chemicals.

**T**he United States faced problems from toxic hazards over many years. The most cited case is that of Love Canal in the Niagara Falls area where the community had to be evacuated after extensive news reports of the seepage of chemical waste into homes. This in turn led the US Congress to enact a bill known as Superfund which gave the government authority to clean up toxic dumps. This was followed by the radioactive leak at Three-Mile Island in 1980 and the dioxin leak at Missouri. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the former Soviet Union occurred in 1986, nearly two years after Bhopal.

After the Bhopal disaster, concerned legislators in the United States pressed for and conducted hearings into Carbide's safety record. Powerful trade unionists, environmentalists and others deposed at these hearings.

It is interesting to note the level of involvement of local politicians as well as national level figures in the investigations. One state senator from Virginia, which houses several Carbide facilities, remarked that while 'tradeoffs' were no longer acceptable, what was truly alarming was that 'a potential long-term health risk now seems a clear and present danger, a matter of life and death.'

This same legislator, Tod J. Kaufman, asked searching questions: 'Are the evacuation plans adequate? Do people in the surrounding communities know what to do when the whistle sounds? Are there provisions to transport people away from the area? Should they get into their cars? If they do, do they know which direction to go? Do they even know what not to do?' I doubt whether any Indian Member of Parliament has even bothered to raise similar questions about the legacy of Bhopal.

**W**hat is noteworthy is that industry was able, despite the massive press coverage on the Bhopal tragedy and lobbying by environmentalists as well as pro-ecology legislators, to stall laws that would have forced it to tighten its safety record and invest heavily in safety procedures. The entire process slowed down with the passage of time; even newspapers lost interest. Then an event occurred which galvanized everyone: the leak of aldivarb oxime gas from a Union Carbide plant in West Virginia, forcing the evacuation of hundreds and the hospitalisation of 135 with breathing problems. The incident made a mockery of Carbide's claim, 'It can't happen here,' referring to Bhopal and a five million dollar upgrade of facilities at this very plant that leaked!

Carbide and the chemical industry were once again pushed against the ropes and this time there was no letting up, either from the media or the legislators and the strong environmental lobby. Although Bhopal was horrific, it was geographically too distant. But the latest event was in the industry's very backyard.

The leak took place in August 1985. By November that year, the Environmental Protection Agency published the first list of hazardous chemicals. The Toxic Release Inventory, passed as a law by Congress, required that industrial companies publicly report emissions of more than 10 pounds of any of 350 toxic substances on an annual basis to the EPA. Government control tightened over industry; it was another blow by the environmental lobby.

This lobby also worked hard to insert another piece of pro-environmental legislation into a larger bill, known as SARA or Superfund Amendments Reauthorisation Act. While the bigger bill served as a platform for many sharp battles between pro and anti-industry groups, a group of Congressional aides met with environmentalists and lobbyists to enact a plan called the federal community right-to-know. This is significant for India because it empowers any person to seek and gather information about hazardous chemicals and the emergency planning procedures that exist in plants that handle more than a threshold of any of 366 chemicals. Those plants with more of these chemicals were required to file reports by emergency plant personnel, with environmental agency officials and the public. These provisions were enacted into law in November 1986, less than two years after the Bhopal incident.

But what of India? 'To judge by the international response to the Bhopal tragedy... one would have thought that the accident occurred in the US rather than in India,' said the *Business Standard* in 1986. At that time, the government filed a suit for damages against Carbide, enacted an Environment Protection Act and spoke about the need for comprehensive regulatory controls in hazardous industries.

**T**en years later, what is the situation? Dilip Biswas, the current Chairman of the Central Pollution Control Board, says that 'If you are looking for miracles, that hasn't happened. Realistically, it's too much to expect. What has resulted is discipline and fear of course.' What Biswas, a diligent, straight-forward man, did not add in the interview with *India Today* (15 July 1996), is that it is not fear of official wrath but the fear of the courts that is forcing polluters and industry to pay attention to the book. Officials are forced to implement the law because of the surge of judicial activism.

Recent news accounts speak of how thousands of polluting industries have been asked to shift out of Delhi, years after they were supposed to have done so.

And how this will actually benefit them enormously, because they are sitting on prime real estate that will fetch them many times over what they may have to invest in new land and infrastructure away from the city. But it is the small scale industrialist who will get squeezed, if not crushed in the bargain. The real beneficiaries will be giants like the Shriram group, which have the capital, skills and resilience to deal with such moves.

In terms of development, small scale industrialists must be assisted by the government, through multilateral and donor funding, to turn to new environmentally friendly businesses. That is one way the development wheel can be stopped from crushing them. Also, their businesses must be linked to larger industries to whom they can supply expertise or skilled workers or equipment. Simultaneously, small scale industry must be clearly told that there are some fields that they must keep out of.

**T**here are a few other areas where the need for change must be emphasised. One, the strengthening and enforcing of zoning laws to prevent populations from growing outside factories, even in rural areas. We tend to gravitate toward work opportunities which invariably result in shanty towns that can be wiped out with a burst of lethal gases or an explosion at a chemical plant. A zoning board, comprising of local NGOs, management, trade unions, administration and the local legislator/zilla panchayat members must ensure that human habitation is kept at a safe distance from hazardous industries. Otherwise, we will end up with the same tragic mess as in Bhopal and elsewhere. The zoning laws must ensure that companies abide by city master plans and help them to make the transition as painless as possible. Yet, despite all this, if they fail, they must be heavily penalised.

Two, develop and encourage more eco-friendly industries, be it horticulture, safe pesticides, or organic and other 'natural' fertilisers. The costs of damaged lands and environment are inestimable; reclamation costs far more than setting up a new industry or buying new land for agriculture.

Often the farmer whose land has been ruined cannot afford an alternative.

Three, employ more qualified inspectors of hazardous factories. In West Bengal, according to one account, 18 engineers monitor 10,000 factories. This is stupid. Surely there are enough qualified engineers who are unemployed and who can do a good job in checking industrial pollution and safety.

Four, accept international standards for pollution levels in our products and monitor and ensure that these goods match other international products.

Five, make access to clean technology easier for industry and for those who work in this field: NGOs, specialist media, government agencies and trade unions.

**W**e have more than 40 legislative weapons to attack offending plants. But little has been achieved to improve and modernise these plants. There are defining moments of an event, a disaster. Yet, we seem to have missed them. Most significantly, our attitudes to safety, industry and emergency preparedness have not changed. Everything remains knee-jerk and ad hoc. The environmental movement got a boost after the Bhopal disaster but the focus on the legal battle, important though it was, led to a dissipation of energies on questions of setting standards for compensation, safety and safety audits of companies using toxic chemicals. Many opportunities were missed in that period and with the opening up of the economy Indian and foreign companies may simply flout the law, chanting the *mantra* of higher growth, endangering communities, our natural resources and long-term gains.

We appear to have learnt little from Bhopal except to organise an anniversary march and burn effigies at the site of the tragedy. Little has changed except our increasing propensity to violate every law with impunity.

Some hope was raised by a series of influential environmental movements and their leaders, both high-profile and low-key. These include Mahesh Mehta, the crusading environmental lawyer in the Supreme Court; Medha Patkar of

the Narmada Bachao Andolan; Anil Agarwal and his creative team at the Centre for Science and Environment; Ravi Chopra and C.P. Bhatt (of Chipko fame) just to name a few. Their work reaches across India and across our frontiers.

**T**he Supreme Court has been a major ally in this effort, handing down landmark judgements, forcing polluters to pay and clean up. Because ultimately, money and penalties are powerful tools in ensuring good development and a clean environment. If polluters, whether industry or individual, are forced to pay heavily for their acts of omission and commission, surely that will go some way in bringing a sense of responsibility to the corporate world.

Finally, one would suggest that, as in the United States, we should have a national right-to-know act that empowers all Indians to gather information about chemical hazards, factories which use these materials, their emergency preparations and whether inspections are carried out regularly and strictly. The Bhopal unit and other plants were regulated much too lightly. Both industry and the government will make a hue and cry; the former will protest against sensitive industrial information reaching their competitors while the government will argue that such a move will undermine its authority and lead to mischief. Yet, without the right to know, our cities and the environment around major industrial complexes will remain time bombs without citizens having the right to safeguard their interests and, indeed, their lives.

The Bhopal Syndrome remains with us. It will not go away. But if we make sure that the weapons of information and communication are in our hands, then we can help build the structure of a safer, saner society.

Ten years ago I had stated in my book, *Bhopal, the Lessons of a Tragedy* that 'Eternal vigilance is the price nations pay for their liberty. They cannot be less vigilant about safety in the new development process.' This remains even more relevant today.

# In the public interest

SRIRAM PANCHU

PUBLIC Interest Litigation (PIL) has put the courts, especially the Supreme Court, in a position of decisive influence. A new-found power of activism sees judicial initiatives in fields traditionally marked out as legislative and executive territory. Constitutional law is no longer a matter of mere interpretation and judges are not content to be aloof referees of the conflicts between contending parties. The entry of the court into the development arena has changed the dynamics of governance.

It is difficult to identify areas untouched by PIL. They include civil and political rights – to a speedy trial, release of bonded labour, conditions of detention; and economic and social issues – livelihood, employment of children, starvation, primary education, environment protection against pollution of water and air, against hazardous wastes and chemicals, safety on roads and work places, consumer protection, etc. The list is seemingly endless. Clearly the lines of separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary are being redrawn.

In 1803, John Marshall, politically savvy Chief Justice of the US, propounded the doctrine of judicial review – the power of the court to strike down legislative enactments, which in the court's view were contrary to the Constitution. This power, Marshall said, came from the court's role as the protector of the Constitution. Judicial review is well known as a measure to check legislative and administrative action. But there are few parallels to the Indian Supreme Court's use of judicial power. Activist judges issue directions, mandating what steps should be taken by the executive. They make policy on admission to medical colleges, close down fume-emitting factories, order and monitor clean-up of rivers, devise management schemes for

hospitals, issue directions to the Election Commission, order Doordarshan to telecast environmental promotion programmes, and draft compensation packages for victims of torture and displacement. Proactive action for development seems to have passed into the hands of the judiciary. Surely, and not so slowly, the court has moved from being an arbitrator of conflict to an overseer, director and sometimes administrator of measures to achieve the constitutional promise of a welfare state. Marshall would have applauded.

Such intervention and extension of judicial power needs considerable justification, especially when it is seen to breach the principle of separation of powers. Marshall justified judicial review on the basis of protection of the Constitution; the Indian Supreme Court has cited the constitutional imperative of a welfare state as the cause of its PIL interventions. The duty of the court, it says, is not only to protect the Constitution by voiding unconstitutional acts but further to advance and achieve constitutional intent. And for such intent the court looked to the Directive Principles of State Policy to justify its interventions for equality of wages, educational rights, environment protection and the like.

The Constitution says that the directive principles are guidelines for state action and are not enforceable. By a neat twist, the court held that fundamental rights and directive principles are part of a grand scheme, that the principles infuse content and meaning into the rights. The fundamental rights are the court's special business. Petitioners may approach the High Court, or even the Supreme Court, in the first instance for the vindication of these rights. Adding a dynamic development content to these rights dramatically increases their sweep

and creates the need for judicial intervention (read also opportunity for judicial activism). Contrast this with the early days of the republic when the court was viewed as obstructing the government's egalitarian measures by according supremacy to fundamental rights over the directive principles, and we get a picture of the extent to which the proactive and public interest mantle has fallen on the court.

**I**n addition, the court read fresh meanings in vital constitutional provisions. Article 14 was for many years only a prescription directing equal treatment to those equally placed. In the 1970s, the Supreme Court declared that equality is the antithesis of arbitrariness and therefore there is a fundamental right to be protected against arbitrary and unreasonable state actions. Similarly, Article 21, mandating that no one shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law, got converted into a virtual due process clause in which the requirement of just, fair and proper procedure was read and the right to life itself became one which included the right to work, the right to livelihood, the right to environment protection, and so on. Widening the amplitude of these rights and incorporating the thrust of the directive principles in them armed the court with sufficient legal basis to intervene in PIL matters. There is little doubt that the constitution makers did not have this in mind.

The earlier cases of PIL were those of rights of prisoners, bonded labour, conditions in homes for destitute women, mismanagement in mental hospitals, children suffering custodial restraints and the plight of hutment dwellers. Clearly these were cases where the aggrieved persons could not by themselves approach the court, let alone the highest court in the country.

The methodology adopted by the Supreme Court for PIL evolved from the unusual problems that these cases brought to the court. Conventional and adversarial litigation, with the court acting as the detached referee of rights, was unsuited

to handle the complaints and demands arising from exploitation, denial of human rights and widespread breach of law. New procedures and remedies had to be devised to be compatible with such litigation.

To its credit the Indian Supreme Court did so with remarkable skill. Rules of procedure were relaxed, if not thrown overboard. Access to the court was enhanced by holding that any person could espouse a public cause; he or she did not have to be directly affected. Class and public actions thus became free from the restrictive rules of *locus standi* which still stifle public law in many jurisdictions abroad. Letters written to judges were treated as writ petitions, giving rise to the 'epistolary jurisdiction'. Newspaper reports were acted upon. Facts, often a matter of contention, were investigated by court appointed committees, instead of having to be proved by the evidentiary process of the Civil Procedure Code and the Evidence Act. Experts were summoned for their views. Remedial action was devised, often in the nature of broadly applicable schemes and authorities were asked to allocate funds and implement them. Monitoring too became a court activity, with reports being submitted and scrutinised. PIL thus gave rise to entirely new procedures. These were justified by the court on the ground that the denial of basic rights to the underprivileged and oppressed would otherwise go unrepresented and unredressed.

**I**t wasn't long before other cases raising important public issues of policy and governance, other than the problems of the poor and deprived, came to the court in PIL dockets. While the rationale initially cited for such intervention and innovative procedure was not available here, there was simultaneously a felt need to address issues affecting the general public. The polity was in need of a saviour. The court was ready and willing. The expanded rationale for PIL was set forth in the Judges case which dealt with the challenge by lawyers to the policy on appointment and transfer of High Court judges. Here, the Supreme Court articulated the doctrine of collective rights derived from socio-

economic obligations of the state. It held that a breach of these duties would cause public injury to an indeterminate class of persons. A redressal for such breach had to be provided as otherwise there would be no check on the performance of these duties and the exercise of public power.

Another key concept was enunciated. In many legal jurisdictions it is the state which sues in the case of public injury by representing the public. Justice Bhagwati doubted whether this could be feasible in the Indian context, given the dependence of government counsel on the political executive. This was seen as a further reason for empowering citizens to redress public injury, to enforce public duty and protect social and collective diffused rights and interest and vindicate public interest.

**T**he flood gates were opened with little limitation on what qualified to be a public interest matter, no litigant restriction save that of acting bona fide, a displayed willingness to relax procedural requirements and barriers for access to the court, innovative fact finding and compliance monitoring methods. The stage was set for prolonged and consistent PIL.

The faults in our democracy gave rise to PIL. Perhaps its major unstated premise was that the attempts to fulfil socialist aspirations of a welfare state through a planned economy, bureaucracy-guided development and crash programmes for poverty alleviation made little impact on the condition of the poor. The state, especially its revenues, was being hijacked by predators – the politician and administrative intermediaries. Judges who, in their concern for achieving socialistic aims had ceded ground to the government, had become disillusioned. The situation was made worse by the closed-door system of Indian governance – no public hearings, a lack of transparency, little involvement of people in decisions which determine the quality of their lives.

To assess the role of PIL in our democracy and the resolution of conflicts that emerge as part of the development process, one should examine the question

from different angles. In the creation, articulation and extension of rights, PIL judgements have played a stellar role. The right to livelihood, the right to minimum wages, equal pay for equal work, protection of children from economic exploitation, environmental protection, the right to primary education are just some rights which the court lifted from the category of unenforceable state obligation pitchforking them in the bundle of fundamental rights. These represent prime development aims; the struggle to secure them is greatly aided by this process of converting claims into rights, albeit not by the conventional process of legislation but creative judicial interpretation.

It has also brought about sensitization to the issues of poverty, homelessness, starvation, destitution, environmental degradation and governmental lawlessness. As the grim reality of Indian conditions came into rarefied court halls used to dealing with arcane issues in a detached setting, and as shocked judges grappled to devise solutions, it was clear that the law and the courts had ceased to be spectators or peripheral participants in issues of development, or the lack of it. A PIL case in the Supreme Court puts the subject on the national agenda, even when substantive relief is difficult or protracted.

In fashioning the public interest litigant as one whose chief requirement is that of acting *bona fide*, PIL allows the concerned citizen, acting individually and in groups, to get involved in development issues in ways unimaginable before. To cite two examples: M.C. Mehta has probably done more to focus attention on the environment and obtain relief than entire government departments. H.D. Shourie, is another indefatigable campaigner, long retired from government service. Time and again he has raised key issues — pensions to keep pace with inflation, a consumer act awaiting implementation, lawyers going on strike — and obtained landmark judgements. NGOs are consistent PIL litigants, using the court to acquire leverage in issues of development. This kind of empowerment is an important part and result of the PIL process. Its

success can be gauged from the fact that anti-establishment groups have conducted some of the most active PIL campaigns.

Accountability of the executive is another benefit of PIL. The system ensured that while government had power and discretion, obligation and accountability were another matter altogether. Government officials are not answerable to members of the public. Indeed, it is often difficult to get an answer from them, let alone seek accountability. With the court in the picture, respondents have to answer, account for and explain what action they have taken about bonded labour, the need to build a highway on the coast, why no action was initiated against illegal builders or the failure of political parties to file income tax returns. Forcing political parties to account for their funds is the most recent of Shourie's common causes. It highlights corruption, which surely ought to be regarded as a key issue in any discussion regarding development. Corruption saps and retards development. Increasingly, decisions are motivated by graft, as a result of which public interest suffers and development objectives get sidelined. PIL is slowly, and one hopes surely, coming to grips with this malaise. In picking on the Jain hawala transactions, it showed up the failure of the investigative agencies and the Prevention of Corruption Act to deal with this cancer.

Of some concern is the court's handling of development issues where the question is one of choosing development models. Such questions arise in cases of dams, roads, railways, power projects, use of coastal areas, forest felling and the like. These questions involve development of a certain kind facing issues of environment protection, displacement and conservation. Here, all too readily, the court tends to cede ground to the executive. The Banwasi Seva Ashram case is one exceptional instance where a rehabilitation scheme for tribals displaced by a thermal power project was worked out by the Supreme Court. Normally, judges are uncomfortable with having to assume powers of decision-making in such mat-

ters. They back away on grounds of an inability to interfere with 'policy decisions', large investments, *fait accompli* and the like. Obviously, they lack the expertise to deal with conflicting claims over the costs and benefits, some unquantifiable and others subject to value decisions, of such projects. Thus, in major PIL conflicts relating to sustainable development like Silent Valley, Tehri, Enron and the Konkan railway project, we can see the court deferring all too readily to the views of the executive and the reports of its experts and committees.

The court has to find a way to handle complex development issues which are likely to emerge in greater numbers as the country moves into the liberalisation phase. For economic development to translate into poverty alleviation and socio-economic development will require more than reassuring noises of trickle down theories and safety nets. As the public sector is scaled down and state regulation, characterised by corruption and inefficiency gets weaker, there will be a need for countervailing forces to focus on the poor, on inequality, on the use of resources, protection of the environment and the model of development appropriate for India. It would be a pity if PIL were to take a back seat on these issues.

As Upendra Baxi puts it, PIL issues call for a new kind of law and a different kind of judging — a mix of adjudication, legislation and administration. In development conflicts, especially involving projects, the court should try another role — that of mediation. Here the court is not required to provide the answers, but facilitate the process — ensure full flow of information, proper substantive hearings, impartial decision-making bodies, agreed fact-finding mechanisms, responsibility for implementation, joint monitoring, redressal and compensation schemes. With the respect it commands, and the threat of adverse orders, the court is well placed as a mediator to encourage and push contestants to move from unyielding positions to focusing on long-term



interests, generating options for settlement, examining trade-offs and protection that lead to full, or even partial, solutions. By doing so, the process of conflict resolution moves from judicial fiat to one by consensus arising from communication and participation—a far more difficult process, but better suited to the development discourse.

**A**ttractive as PIL may look, and however comforting the idea of the wise men of the judiciary calling the shots, PIL is not the answer to all, or even most, of our problems. Court dockets are full, and while issues of PIL deserve priority, judges cannot be unmindful of having to clear large backlogs of litigation. Arrears of PIL cases too have begun to take on sizeable proportions. Sometimes, PIL cases are handled inadequately; rights are often declared in sweeping and grand words, but positive relief is denied to the petitioners. The reverse also happens—relief is granted without a clear statement of the law. Several court initiatives have taken the form of creating schemes with widespread implications; some, like the medical college admissions, failed to anticipate difficulties and have run into problems. Others, like the Ganga Action Plan and the relocation of polluting industries, require a degree of implementation and monitoring for which the court is hard pressed to find resources. There is thus a danger of raising expectations and leaving them unfulfilled. PIL came into being precisely because of a malfunctioning executive. If the court too takes on more than it can deliver, it may well result in it too being regarded as yet another dysfunctional institution.

An excessive reliance on PIL is fraught with danger. There are limitations to how much the court can push and goad executive action. There are limits to the capacity of judges to find the answers, and to implement and monitor them. Court-mandated solutions should be viewed as another tool in the armoury of action, not as a substitute for the democratic processes of creating awareness, moulding public opinion and creating a grounds well for development. PIL can also create

a false sense of security. In one sense, the court is part of the establishment and PIL seems to provide the feeling that the system can provide solutions without drastic changes. There is the risk of PIL legitimising parts of the state that have become corroded, masking the deep rot in the core of our democracy and delaying much needed reform. Ultimately, our system will work only if there is proper functioning of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. There is an understandable disillusionment with the legislature and judiciary; we must change and reform them, and not expect the judiciary to substitute for them.

**P**ublic interest litigation ought to be increasingly used as a tool for empowering people, enabling them to meaningfully participate in the development process, and in the resolution of conflicts that this would generate. This is only possible with greater transparency in government processes and through an open flow of information; by participation of people through the medium of open hearings; non-official representation of concerned citizens on committees, and most important, by implementing the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. To these, add measures to secure accountability, especially personal liability, for clearly illegal, willfully negligent and malafide actions of officials. All these steps require legal innovations. In the absence of proper legislation, a creative court which reads expanded meanings in the Constitution could possibly supply the needed requirements for fair procedure and safeguards against arbitrariness. Increased participatory processes, accountability and a decentralised government will then lessen the need for court intervention on a frequent basis.

PIL is thus an innovation that gives vast interventionist powers to the judiciary. Given the current climate of distrust of government, such assumption of power has been widely welcomed. At least for the foreseeable future, it is here to stay. It is not the maximum, but the wise and efficient use of PIL that will best serve our democracy and development.

# Who speaks for the victims?

AMITA BAVISKAR

LET me begin with two stories from two different continents. The first relates to 1993 when there was a crisis in the Narmada Bachao Andolan and we gathered in Dhulia, Maharashtra. An adivasi boy, Raimal Vasava, had been shot dead by the police when he tried to prevent government officials from forcibly surveying his village, slated for submergence in the Sardar Sarovar Project. As the news of his death spread through the valley, people travelled to Dhulia, the district headquarters, to collectively mourn the first death in the cause, and to protest against the state. The mass demonstration before the Collectorate in Dhulia was brutally broken up by the police. About fifty people had to be hospitalized with fractures, bleeding wounds and

concussion – injuries sustained in the lathi charge. Andolan activists struggled to control those anxious, confused moments, trying to choose the best strategy and logistics.

It was essential that news of these events be quickly conveyed to the national press. It was decided that a couple of adivasis (tribals) would be sent with an activist to Delhi where they would recount their experience in a press conference. Milind, an activist from Bombay who had worked for two years in the most remote villages of the district and who had received an ugly gash on his head, was uncertain about which adivasis should go to Delhi. He looked around the room, considering and rejecting them one by one. 'Punia was there when Raimal was shot, but he is shy and won't speak properly before the press. The same problem with Ditya....' Then his eye fell on Malsing who, clad in a shirt and trousers, stood out among the other adivasi men who were dressed in thin cotton drawers or lungis. 'Malsing would be good. He is articulate and clear, and should be fine before the press, but,' said Milind looking doubtfully at Malsing's trousers, 'he doesn't look like an adivasi.'

\* In this article, I deal with a triad of relationships – between adivasis, activists and the state. I have explored these issues in more detail elsewhere; in particular, I have dealt with the complexity of what is often uncritically accepted as 'adivasi community' – a term that masks the many differences and inequalities of gender, class and caste (see Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflict over Development in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1995 and 'Tribal Politics and Sustainable Development'. Paper presented at Conference on Environmental Discourses and Human Welfare in South and South-East Asia, 28-30 December, Social Science Research Council, New York, 1995.

How should an adivasi look?

The second story dates to 1988 and is from Akwesasne, a Mohawk Indian reserve on the St. Lawrence river, straddling the US-Canada border. The Mohawks of Akwesasne live downstream of a General Motors dump which leaked PCBs and other hazardous chemicals into their environment. When General Motors refused to provide information about the risk to which they were being subjected, the Akwesasne Tribal Council started collecting its own data. The Council's work played a major role in persuading the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to clean up the dumpsite. The Mohawks shared their data with many researchers including my husband, an environmental toxicologist modelling the movement of PCBs through the foodweb. One day my husband happened to be around when Brian Cole, a member of the Environmental Division formed by the Tribal Council, returned from a meeting with EPA, other government agencies and General Motors. Someone asked Brian how the meeting had gone. Brian replied with a grin, 'Oh, I gave them Chief Seattle's speech, version 3!'

**H**ow should an adivasi speak?

When we talk about the victims of development, we acknowledge their powerlessness. We talk about people who are weighed down by social inequalities, whose concerns are either invisible or ignored by decision-makers. There are many sides to this silence. Deafness is only one. There is also incomprehension – when you don't understand their language and they don't speak yours. When their benefit-cost analysis cannot accommodate your costs. When you don't even know what benefit-cost analysis is. Or when the routine calamities of illness, drought and debt that dog one's steps pale before the total havoc unleashed by a development project. Project promoters talk of profit, growth, progress in a backward region, multiplier effects, compensation. The victims talk in terms of loss – of livelihood, of place, a familiar community and a way of life. As people talk past each other, in different tongues, there emerges an interpreter – the activist.

The activist spans several worlds and is 'biculturally fluent' (I first heard this phrase from an NRI intern at the World Bank in Washington who used it to describe herself). This fluency in many languages enables the activist to fine-tune the victims' voice to its audiences – generally the state, international agencies like the World Bank and the intelligentsia. This entails couching things in terms intelligible to the audience: translating the victims' sense of injustice into an invocation of ILO Convention 107 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, for example. It also entails expanding the terms of reference: moving from compensation based on private property to compensation based on common property, for instance. Schooled in the technologies and relationships of development, the activists bring skills of handling media, of using legal and bureaucratic processes and deciphering technical information – turning these weapons against their creators.

In a situation marked by inequality, distance and incomplete information, it is perhaps natural that middlemen will emerge. Their mediation is ostensibly aimed at facilitating dialogue, enabling victims to speak and be heard, so that they cease being victims. In this sense, successful activists make themselves redundant. If they have done their job well, they stop being needed.

**Y**et activists are not mere mouthpieces, faithfully mirroring the concerns of the victims. They have their own agenda. The best of them have set aside material rewards, family and middle class security and suffered the privations that are part of rural activism because of their commitment to the cause of social justice. They have entered the battlefield humble, willing to learn from those less powerful than themselves. At the same time, activists have come to the field carrying the ideological baggage of the metropolis – the grand theoretical framework, the larger script of history in which roles are already allotted. They believe they know the good guys from the bad, the capitalist from the peasant, the agent of the impe-

rialist state from the member of the vanguard party. But the action can never degenerate into quixotry, the self-aggrandizing fantasy of the well-meaning, because there is the touchstone of legitimacy that keeps them honest.

**F**or an activist, authenticity derives from the demonstrated ability to generate trust and confidence among the people that one represents. A Medha Patkar or Father Kocherry commands our attention because she or he is accepted as a leader by the people of the Narmada valley or by the Kerala fisherfolk. Without the backing of the masses, the activist is nothing. This ground rule creates the condition for dialogue and the sharing of agenda in a way which tries to circumvent the inequalities of power and knowledge. To be recognized as an activist by all the groups involved, one has to shed at least some of one's preconceptions. Negotiating with real people and real situations keeps ideology rooted in practice. It also forces the activist to acknowledge the many contradictions that permeate practice and consciousness.

Although activists are aware of the contradictions in being and consciousness, this knowledge is accompanied by a compulsion to represent people in terms of categories familiar and palatable to the audience. Every now and then, activists may succeed in changing perceptions about problems and the kind of people they affect. Yet these cognitive breakthroughs are rare compared to the many instances when activists pitch their campaign to appeal to familiar images and arguments. This means invoking stereotyped identities – the tribal who lives in harmony with nature, the rural woman who guards traditional wisdom, the activist who is a selfless social-worker, and so on. Though there are many advantages in feeding stereotypes, especially when the urgency of struggle requires instant *andolans* that resonate with established categories in the minds of the audience, the activist operates on a slippery slope. The danger lies in perpetuating the essentialist images that people strive to transcend. Of course, as the second story

suggests, it is not only the activist who uses clichéd identities. The adivasis do it too. Images can be deployed with canny cynicism, with sincerity, or with a sense of helplessness. For, to be recognized as authentic, the adivasi must fit the conceptions of dominant others. The answer to the question: 'who is an adivasi?' has multiple choices, but these are generally pre-determined. The option of writing your own answer and still scoring on the test is as best restricted, if not denied.

**W**hy is authenticity an issue? For whom? In contemporary politics, purity of purpose can only be gauged by the purity of the signs one gives off. We signal our sincerity by trying to make our physical persona – aspects of dress, demeanour, and so on – consistent with our audience's expectations. Thus, the authentic adivasi does not wear jeans or speak English (never mind that the adivasi of north-east India does both with equal facility), while the authentic activist conforms in lifestyle to the altruist-ascetic mode established as a norm by the Gandhians and socialists. Like all norms, these are not merely external constraints, but are internalized within our psyche. Activists constantly struggle with self-doubt and the ethical dilemmas that come with the territory of social action. One of the commonest epithets used in activist circles is 'fraud'. So-and-so is a fraud – he goes abroad all the time. So-and-so is a fraud – she takes money from USAID. Such-and-such organization is a fraud – they have an air-conditioned office and only travel by air. Nowhere is the claim of probity in public life scrutinized as closely as it is among activists.

Isometimes think that authenticity is largely a concern of the culturally insecure. The turmoil that marks the modern condition generates many anxieties about identity – one's own and that of others. In this uncertain space, where the sun and other stars are no longer fixed for all time, what was earlier taken for granted appears strange. Detached from our moorings, we hanker after constants, trying to fit reality into our sanitized scheme of history and culture. To some extent, the

preoccupation with authenticity is a disease of luxury, the psychosomatic privilege of people who do not need to worry about survival. For the victims of development, cultural change is intrinsic to one's being. Among poor adivasis, there is much less agonizing about identity and authenticity; there is greater concern with the nitty-gritty of getting by, both materially and ideologically. When everyday life involves negotiating with forest guards, Hindu reformers and petty traders, identity emerges in action. Adivasi political action is often widely heterogeneous, full of disparate elements – from burning down a government nursery supplying saplings to be planted on encroached forest land to becoming *bhagats* and giving up meat and liquor; from waging a feud against a neighbouring village over an abducted woman to demonstrating before the government in favour of autonomy for scheduled areas. Which of these actions are political and which are not? Which represent authentic adivasi consciousness? Who asks these questions? Generally not the adivasis.

**T**he pursuit of authenticity becomes an occupational hazard for activists because it is a major concern for the audience that they seek to impress. The state, international donor organizations and the urban intelligentsia are the main agents whose acceptance ultimately decides whether this level of political action succeeds or fails. Why does the World Bank's Operational Manual Statement on displacement recognize the claims of 'indigenous people' over those of dalits and other oppressed? Why is the government willing to sit across the table with some activists and not others? The state acknowledges the claims of those whose authenticity is writ large in ways that conform to its own preconceptions. While these conceptions are vulnerable to change and can be moulded by the ability of political groups to make effective and powerful statements, they generate their own momentum. 'Indigenous people' figured on the Bank's agenda only after sustained political struggle. Yet, once the

category came into being, adivasis the world over found that they had to conform to the Bank's notions of what it means to be authentically 'indigenous'.

But what about the authenticity of the state? Is the state an authentic representative of the people and their aspirations? Does the state speak for the victims of development? Among social movements in India, no one asks this question because the answer is so obvious. According to activists, the state initiates development, facilitating the very processes that destroy the lives of the poor. How can one expect it to protect the poor, they argue, except through patronizing safety net schemes that do more harm than good?

**T**his is where I think activists indulge in their own bit of stereotyping. The distinction between state power and authority is also based on authenticity – viz. the legitimacy that citizens accord to the state. To gain legitimacy, the state has to surrender power, show some semblance of concern for those whom it destroys. This is the Janus face of class character, where the state represents our deepest terrors *as well as* our highest hopes. Both adivasis and activists know this in their heart of hearts, though they may well deny it.

To an extent, this suspicion of the state stems from bitter experience. Adivasis have fought what appears at times to be the almost God-like arbitrariness of state action, whether it be the decision to acquire fertile paddy lands for a military firing range or the bid to extinguish people's customary usufruct rights in order to reserve forests for tigers. Activists have borne countless reverses and frustrations in their work. Yet what keeps both the adivasi and the activist going is faith in the future; their struggle is meaningful only because it is based on the belief that it will ultimately make a difference. The state *will* be transformed, it will *have to* become more responsive when its victims come together in collective struggle. In this struggle lies the potential for creating an authentic state which will represent our consensus about development.

# Books

## **SOCIAL CHANGE AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

**IN INDIA: Structures of Power, Movements of Resistance** edited by T.V. Sathyamurthy. Volume 1: *State and Nation in the Context of Social Change* (1994); Volume 2: *Industry and Agriculture in India since Independence* (1995); Volume 3: *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India* (1996); Volume 4: *Class Formation and Political Transformation in Post-Colonial India* (1996). Oxford University Press, Delhi.

THE volumes under review have emerged from a Ford Foundation project on The Terms of Political Discourse in India. While the overarching title of the series reflects this emphasis, the subtitle and the individual volume titles complicate matters somewhat, as there is much jostling about between the various emphases suggested by these: social change, political discourse, structures of power, movements of resistance, and all or some of these explored through the concepts of state and nation, through policies on industry and agriculture, through categories of caste, class, religion, and gender. It appears that the project was extremely ambitious in scope, but that its all-encompassing nature caused it to lose some of the sharpness of its intended focus. The editor states that the four volumes are 'a coherent work which should be judged as a whole,' and the common thread is provided by the emphasis on political discourse. This review begins by discussing this aspect, going on to address the otherwise disparate concerns of the four volumes individually, before returning to the whole.

In the first volume, the central focus on political discourse is strongly reflected in only a few contributions, notably those by Rajni Kothari, Sudipta Kaviraj, and R. Sudarshan, with some significant reflections on ideational aspects in the paper by Satish Saberwal. Kothari's paper is a characteristically comprehensive overview, a masterly catalogue of virtually every kind of discourse to be found on the Indian political landscape – from the constitutional and institutional through ideological and policy discourses, to the discourses of resistance and violence. The seemingly irreducible complexity of these somewhat belies Kothari's suggestion that the oppositional discourses are united by their commitment to democratic values and institutions, and pitted against colonial, feudal and authoritarian values. Kaviraj's argument about the construction of a nationalist discourse draws attention to the ways in which the colonial

encounter simultaneously effected processes of social change and a delinking of the elite from popular discourse. Kaviraj briefly highlights the tension between region and nation as reflected in nationalist discourse, a dimension of great contemporary relevance.

R. Sudarshan, like Kothari, hints at the multiplicity of available discourses and brings out some of the tensions between them through an examination of the Constitution and its interpretation by the judiciary, on questions of property, federalism and civil liberties. Aparna Mahanta's paper on patriarchy and the Indian state deals with discursive aspects, but in examining state policy on women qua women (e.g., rape, welfare, etc.), gets confined to a state-defined view of what constitutes a gender issue, rather than a gendered view of development policy as such. It serves to complement the papers on the women's movement.

Amiya Bagchi's paper (the only paper in volume 2 to reflect on political discourse) examines the transition in the discourse of planning, from its location in a statist paradigm to its current location within a free-market paradigm. An uncritical acceptance of either, Bagchi suggests, reflects an essentialist view of the state as an autonomous entity acting upon a passive society. In the current context, predatory commercialization is a threat to the empowerment of local communities as well as to the much-needed logic of a public interest.

It is, in fact, in the third volume that the emphasis on discourse is strongest, with the discourse of communalism (in the papers by Sujata Patel and Sudhir Chandra), on reservation (D.L. Sheth), on indigenous peoples (R.K. Nayak) and on gender (Kumkum Sangari and M.S.S. Pandian) placed alongside more straightforward narratives of each of these issues. Patel's interpretation of the discourse of communalism is premised on a distinction, in the Nehruvian ideological tradition, between the ideology of economic development and that of 'pure politics'. Her rather unusual argument suggests that the latter was gradually displaced by an alternative discourse of domination based on minority identity, varna and reservation, paralleled by the use of Hinduism by the ruling classes to contain the challenge of minorities and lower castes. Even if it is at all plausible to club together minority identity/varna/reservation, as Patel does, they are perhaps better understood as constituting claims to fragments of social and political power, rather than an alternative – impliedly unified and even achieved – discourse of domination. To argue that the



ruling classes have seen in Hinduism a powerful counter to such claims is to indulge in precisely the kind of view (critiqued by Patnaik et al in volume 4) which sees classes as fixed, unchanging and undifferentiated entities. It also involves a not altogether comprehensible blurring of the economic basis of class and its ideological expression. Partha Chatterjee's paper (also in volume 3) suggests that the narrative of community is not a post-independence phenomenon, but is central to the articulation of national identity itself, as it carves out a cultural domain to counter the absence of space in the domain of bourgeois social institutions under colonialism.

D.L. Sheth's argument about how 'the modernizing elites, in the immediate aftermath of independence, saw themselves as autonomous mediators between the state and society, [while] their counterparts in contemporary India have shaped their role as active collaborators with the state' (p. 318) hints at an extremely persuasive explanation of much more than just the state's attitude towards reservation for the OBCs. It encompasses not only the political classes, but the bureaucracy as well and possesses the additional merit of recording shifts and transitions.

In the fourth volume, only two papers deal with discourse – Anil Nauriya on the constitutional and jurisprudential discourse on democratic rights and Sumi Krishna on discourses on the environment and development. Krishna analyses three major discourses on the environment: the popular (neo-Gandhian), the managerial, and the radical. In doing so, she rightly emphasises the political and ideological nebulousness and even contradictions of these, which serves to explain why some environmental positions often appear to be incongruous with their articulators. Above all, she bravely points to the ultimate dilemma facing environmental movements, viz., the need to forge common ground with political movements on the basis of questions of power and justice. In his formidably researched and wide-ranging essay, Nauriya identifies the 'modes of interception' involved in the non-recognition of certain rights as fundamental rights in the Constitution, pointing to a fresh constitutional agenda for India.

One wishes that the discursive aspects of sub-nationalism, electoral processes, and welfare and development had also found a place in these volumes. It is, in fact, on economic and developmental aspects that the absence of an emphasis on discourse is most evident. Be that as it may, it is primarily in some of these essays that the four volumes succeed in breaking new ground. The remaining contributions – judged not by their quality which is often extremely good – are limited in terms of being able to provide a new perspective on familiar issues. Let us turn to each of the volumes, individually but also, inevitably, selectively.

The remaining papers in volume 1 may be classified into two categories: those concerned with specific structures of power, such as the bureaucracy or political parties, and those which analyse perspectives on Indian politics and the

state. Subrata Mitra's essay, which belongs to the latter problematises usefully the idea of multiple political discourses in competition with each other, hinting at the idea of an endogenous political vocabulary as a clue to the understanding of a political discourse rooted in Indian political experience. It is this intrinsic tension between indigenous tradition and the Constitution (with its colonial affinities) that is the subject of Satish Saberwal's profound, but not very optimistic, view of a society searching for ways in which it may reconstitute itself and define a shared 'commonsense'.

Volume 2 is an exploration of the economic policy of the Indian state. The essays on the liberalization of the economy trace the lineage of this policy in regimes since 1977, a view which is now widely accepted. We have long been accustomed to lamenting industrial stagnation in India, and Isher Ahluwalia's work has given us one explanation for it. In this context, Sanjaya Baru's paper on industrial policy is singular in its identification of the indirect role of public investment in fostering industrial development. This, Baru argues, has occurred through agriculture-led industrial growth in some regions where agrarian capitalism has triggered off locally based industrialization. Investment in professional education has created a pool of skilled individuals who, despite migrating to the West, constitute an important resource base of capital accumulation, entrepreneurship, and a means of access to technology: while investment in the infrastructural sector has facilitated the creation of a new contractor class which is an important source of capital, enterprise and demand.

The late Krishna Bharadwaj's paper is rich in data, and documents the dichotomous pattern of development, as intensified since the 1980s. The 'modern' capitalist sector shows higher rates of capital accumulation, sectoral growth rates and technological dynamism. The vast majority is linked to this sector by advancing commercialization and the state's development strategies, but though dependent on it for the satisfaction of its consumption needs, lacks sufficient employment or income to access these. Ravi Srivastava's paper also argues the unevenness of development, but goes further to forge critical links between political movements (both ethnic and regional) and the uneven penetration of capitalist relations, with its usual consequences for the nature of class formation.

Vaidyanathan's paper on the political economy of anti-poverty programmes displays a somewhat uncritical acceptance of the institutional and organizational constraints as being of central importance. While there is unquestionably a need to improve administration and make local panchayati raj institutions more dynamic, the failure of policy on poverty is also related to larger social and economic constraints. Indeed, it can be argued that the focus on poverty alleviation was itself necessitated by the failure of land reform policy, the nature of development strategy (especially its agrarian component), and the hesitation of

the ruling classes to squarely address the question of reforming inequitous structures of power and wealth in the countryside. Despite some excellent papers, this second volume suffers the disadvantage of having been published too soon after another book with a similar emphasis, *The State and Development Planning in India*, edited by T.J. Byres.

Volume 3 – unsurprisingly, given its multiple foci – also happens to be the largest volume of the series. Javeed Alam offers an unusual interpretation of Muslim communalisms, which he contrasts with the monolithic nature of Hindutva ideology (reinforced by Patnaik and Chalam's paper on this subject in the same volume). He also challenges the received wisdom on the subject by asserting the absence of a coincidence of Hindu and Muslim communalism in the same region or area. Alam's paper is a strong plea to reconsider the naivete of social science categories, which seek to analytically homogenize not only the Muslim community, but also Adivasi communities across India. But that there are issues on which, despite important differences, unity can emerge is indisputable. This point is illustrated by Mushirul Hasan's discussion of the uniform civil code and the Babri Masjid episode, as also by Gautam Navlakha's paper on Kashmir. Both these papers, despite their very distinct prognoses and policy prescriptions, place considerable analytical weight on the role of the state in engendering resistance.

This volume is substantially concerned with movements of resistance grounded in identities of various kinds: regional, religious, caste and gender. Caste-based resistance is illustrated with reference to reservations for the OBCs, as also two papers on the Dalit movement by Gail Omvedt and V. Suresh, and two others on the indigenous peoples, by Radhakant Nayak and Janardhan Rao. Omvedt problematises the multiple roots of exploitation and argues that until the issues of environment, peasant and women's subsistence and alternative development models are resolved, Indian politics cannot be socially transformed. V. Suresh, on the other hand, places the onus squarely on the Dalit movement itself, and substantially on its ability and skill as an organizing political force. The two papers on indigenous peoples complement each other adequately, as one focuses on varied discourses, while the other covers the Adivasi experience from colonial times to the present, recording the shifts brought about by the development strategy of the state and the Adivasi response in terms of movements of resistance.

The fourth volume in this series takes the theme of resistance to the trade union movement, the peasant movement, the left parties, the movement for democratic rights, and the environmental movement. It also deals with the politics of popular education and the violation of human rights involved in the birth control policy. The essay by Prabhat Patnaik, C.P. Chandrashekhara and Abhijit Sen links the proliferation of the bourgeoisie with both development

policy, as well as international factors, but remarks – in the postscript – on the surprising opposition, from within the bourgeoisie itself, to the structural adjustment programme. Both the papers on the agrarian sector, by Dev Nathan and R. Vidyasagar, attempt to articulate an agenda for the left. While Nathan believes that a truly revolutionary movement of agricultural labourers and poor peasants (in Bihar) is only possible if it also encompasses a struggle against caste, bureaucratic exploitation, and patriarchal oppression, Vidyasagar analyses the polarization within the farmers' movement between the kulak-led organizations and the left-led peasant movement. He is nevertheless optimistic that the incorporation of the former's agenda in the mainstream political process has facilitated a slowing down of such movements.

In the final chapter of the fourth and final volume, the editor provides a survey of state and society in a changing political perspective. He locates the simultaneous centrality and marginality of the state in the conflicts between different segments of the bourgeoisie. Denying that the decline of the Congress is sufficient reason to diagnose an 'institutional vacuum', he argues that the remedy lies in the democratic and effective channelling of pro-people mass action, rather than in more governance, as much American social science has suggested. This explains the welcome emphasis in these volumes on movements of resistance rather than on political structures and processes. Many of these movements are analysed with reference to the constraints imposed by the state and dominant classes. What this mammoth enterprise fails to fully account for, however, is the reverse impact: viz., of movements of resistance on the institutional weaknesses of the state, on the many failures of the state to incorporate and coopt such challenges. There is here perhaps more cause for celebration than these volumes would have us believe. There is also some reason for good cheer in that the volumes, by describing the co-existence of a multiplicity of social and political discourses, testify to the vibrancy of India's democracy.

Niraja Gopal Jayal

**THE REDISCOVERY OF INDIA: A New Sub-continent** by Ansar Hussain Khan. Orient Longman, Delhi, 1995.

THIS is an earnest, passionate and astonishing advocacy for the creation of a confederation consisting of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The astonishment stems, first and foremost, from the identity of the author. Born in 1928 in Calcutta, Ansar Hussain Khan spent his childhood in many (and, as he says, 'overwhelmingly Hindu-majority') parts of British India. Much against his wishes, he and his family, migrated to Pakistan at the time of Partition. After spending two years at Government College, Lahore, he joined the United Nations in 1950 where he was to remain until he

retired in Switzerland in 1987. In 1986 he asked for, and obtained, Indian citizenship.

All along he had regarded himself as a citizen of the three countries of the sub-continent but he could not say as much while he was a Pakistani since that would have run foul of the 'ideology of Pakistan' built upon the two-nation theory which had been raised 'to the level of a sacrament'. However, as an Indian, 'I could say whatever I like, even preach secession without courting ire.' Far from preaching secession, Khan makes an eloquent plea to all three states in the sub-continent to put in place appropriate confederal arrangements for the greater good of their billion-plus people. No Muslim from the sub-continent after Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has pleaded his case with such compelling elegance.

Another reason for the astonishment comes from Ansar Khan's interpretation of history. He is quite harsh on his co-religionists for not denouncing the harm that successive waves of foreign invaders did to the Hindu psyche. The denunciation, he argues, would have been perfectly in line with the injunctions of the Holy Koran. In much the same vein he charges his co-religionists with their signal failure to practice the virtue of tolerance as regards the followers of other faiths. This failure was to prove catastrophic since it led to the polarization of hearts and minds of people who otherwise shared so much in common. On this score, too, Khan is that rare Muslim writer who is not afraid to subject his own religious community to the most severe critical scrutiny – and this without sounding the least bit apologetic.

The astonishment does not end here. Khan is equally, if not more, harsh on the British rulers for exacerbating Hindu-Muslim differences. But he reserves some of his sharpest barbs for Gandhi and Nehru and the Congress in general. He accuses them of arrogance, spite and a chronic inability to face facts and realities. Taken together, he argues, these factors pushed Jinnah to adopt a more intransigent stance though, even in his most obdurate moments (that is to say, when he gave his call for Pakistan) he hoped against hope that it would be possible to preserve British India's unity. But he is quick to add that once 'Muslims launched on a programme which implied institutionalizing their distrust of the majority, the latter's resentment turned into hostility and later to hate.' This version of the events leading up to Partition will obviously not be accepted by those who believe that under the leadership of Gandhi and Nehru the Congress was more sinned against – by the British and the Muslim League – than sinning.

And, here precisely lies the true reason why the author's approach becomes at once intriguing and disconcerting. The author pours scorn on Nehru's secularism and gives a clean chit to the Sangh Parivar. He whole-heartedly endorses the idea of a Hindu rashtra. 'It is unadulterated Hinduism that must rule India with its gentleness and wisdom, free of the muck accreted over the centuries in holding out against foreign domination. And it is unadul-

terated Islam that Pakistan and Bangladesh must install, a faith of grandeur and human dignity, freed of the distortions it took on under the Indian sky. All three countries must give themselves political parties capable of expressing the strong religious urge of the people in a creative and magnificent polity, in which secularism is put out.'

Khan's favoured party in India is the BJP. He does not mention his favourities in Pakistan and Bangladesh. (Indeed he does not even mention the names of individuals who share his thinking though he does say that they exist.) At any rate, Khan's endorsement of the Parivar puts its token Muslims into the shade. Indeed he argues that there is much to rejoice in the evolution of the Parivar – the fact that it has turned its back to some of the teachings of Golwalkar. He credits the BJP with 'astonishing ideological flexibility' and states that the Sangh Parivar is 'distinguished by its pragmatism'. What is more, he finds the Parivar's call to the Muslim minority to adopt Hindu culture to be perfectly in order.

There are obviously plenty of problems with Khan's theses. One is the short-shrift he gives to the contribution of western thought to the blossoming of liberal democracy in the sub-continent. The notions of individual freedom, equality, social justice, of a political community based not on a shared religion but a shared appurtenance to nationhood – do not emanate naturally from the 'essential truths' of the religions of the sub-continent, and certainly not in the ways these 'truths' have been put into practice so far. Nor does he take into full account the fact that Hinduism, even more than Islam, is not an uninterrupted continuum. Its chief characteristic is its diversity and the Sangh Parivar's attempt to cast it in another, more cohesive mould is part of a political programme which does not and cannot find universal acceptance.

To argue, as the author does, that a Hinduism or an Islam purged of its reactionary elements can constitute a sound basis of nationhood or even of a confederal unit is wily-nilly to re-introduce the two-nation theory by the back door. Furthermore, Khan does not appear to have noticed the pulls and pressures within the BJP in recent months. Finally, he seems not to take into account that the post-partition generations of Indians and Pakistanis (and now Bangladeshis) may be in favour of greater cooperation between the three countries but are not at all disposed to entertaining the idea of a confederation.

All this, however, must not detract from the book's main merit which is to provoke fresh thinking on issues of critical significance to the sub-continent. Ansar Khan's prescriptions may be somewhat naive and some of his judgments may be unfair but there is no denying the fine sentiments underlying them. The BJP, in particular, has much to rejoice in this book but also much to learn from it. If it heeds even a part of the author's advice, it may at long last lose the 'politically untouchable' status it has come to acquire. And the secularist, too, must give the book the attention it

deserves: it provides plenty of insights which should encourage him to define secularism with greater clarity and vigour.

**Dileep Padgaonkar**

**DECOLONIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT – Hind Swaraj Revisited** by Makarand Paranjape. Sage Publications, Delhi, 1993.

THIS is an unusual book for three reasons. It is deceptively simple and written as a dialogue between teacher and student. It explores questions which are fundamental to our future and the type of nation that we would like to be. It displays effortless scholarship.

It discusses many questions, each related to the other. The author has structured the book to 'begin with specific, even personal issues, and then... moves on to social, national and global concerns.' He reminds us of our continuing colonization by the West as we are reminded of the inferiority of our degrees, teaching and research. We are part of a system in which we are 'inferior and the West is superior,' and this has bred traits of servility and self-contempt. Independence has not freed our people. We need to decolonize, enable a process of empowerment whereby we can arrive at our own self-definitions, formulate our goals, and strive to achieve them without interference from or domination by another culture or society. He says that 'we are being controlled... by a world economic order.' He calls for resistance to the violence of western civilization, the continued exploitation of the rest of the world by the West, the globalization of culture necessitated by consumerism and the need to abandon imitative lifestyles. Along with this he also argues for our rejection of the destructive aspects of our past.

This leads him to try and define India. He says: 'India develops through accommodation... that past matters to us which is still living... The West moves from the past to the future; India moves from the present to the present... India is a space for plurality, tradition and metaphoric thinking.... One element of this pluralism may well be a modernity of the western variety... but this should not imply the loss or a destruction of the other, older value systems.'

He argues that we have accepted several aspects of modernity but not sufficiently abolished the values that go with them, leading to inefficient and ineffective institutions. He argues for 'a model of development which is concentrated in rural India, employing alternate technologies, local means, manual labour.... It empowers individuals, generates local wealth, and prevents the migration of impoverished peasants to the cities.'

These extracts provide a little flavour of the book, fascinating in its lack of dogma and its willingness to look at all aspects of a question. There is no doubt that our people have bought the western concept of development and modernity. There are many features of this concept which

are useful, for example, the science that made us self-sufficient in food. But to the extent that it homogenises societies and cultures, it must not be allowed to destroy the older Indian traditions and cultures. It also tends to enrich a few while marginalising many. What we must do therefore is to encourage and stimulate alternative lifestyles and models of development so that we have plurality in development, with benefits to the many.

The book by implication, offers suggestions for a decolonized form of development. We need not place barriers on import and on information flow. Let ideas and goods flow in. But let us also help to stimulate alternative lifestyles and alternative forms of development. India is already a vast reservoir of these alternatives. They must not be looked down upon with contempt, or marginalised. They must get an opportunity to flower.

**S.L. Rao**

**PEOPLE AND PROTECTED AREAS – Towards Participatory Conservation in India** edited by Ashish Kothari, Neena Singh and Saloni Suri. Sage Publications, Delhi, 1996.

THE book under review draws attention to the need for encouraging people's participation and conservation of forested areas declared 'protected' by law. These include biosphere reserves, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. The proposed model for encouraging people's participation is joint management. There are 17 articles in the book. Of these, 7 articles (Part 4) are concerned with proposals for joint management of 'protected areas', 6 articles discuss the limits and possibilities of Joint Forest Management (JFM) and 4 articles give an overview of the issues and questions that need to be addressed in order to move 'people's participation' beyond rhetoric. The thrust of the argument is towards defining participation as an active engagement of people in the implementation of laws and rules formulated by 'experts' and supported by the government. What one misses in all the articles is a sensitivity to people's voices, their cultural configurations for mapping natural resources and their perception of nature as more than a mere physical resource.

It is argued that JFM is the appropriate mode for preservation and conservation, without at the same time depriving people of forest resources. The parties that join-up to manage these resources are the people at large and government officials. The agenda for JFM includes the following: the division of protected areas into different zones – keeping in mind the geographical specificity of areas; the accessibility to non-timber forest produce; and the regulation of the relationship between the people and the state.

Borger argues that the division of forests into core, buffer and periphery zones needs to be sensitive to the geographical peculiarities of the area. In the case of the

Bhimashankar wildlife sanctuary he points out, 'Owing to the undulating nature of the terrain, the presence of an east-west running river valley in a basically north-south oriented sanctuary, scattered villages, malki lands and sacred groves, it is difficult to determine core and buffer zones in Bhimashankar in the traditional sense—in which the buffer surrounds the core. This problem needs to be addressed, as maximum protection needs to be given to the east-west river valleys as well as to the sacred groves' (p 157). As regards the relationship between people and the state, Kusum Karnik points out that wherever there is commitment for joint management, it needs to be confirmed. 'Forest officials say that they have a changed plan in which they have suggested that the villages be excluded from the sanctuary area' (p 178).

Further, she states that 'It is difficult to categorically say which human activities of local people are unsuitable and so should be modified. There should be no sweeping statements such as 'shifting cultivation is harmful and that smokeless chulahs are necessary for healthy encroachment.... It is argued that shifting cultivation is beneficial and that smoke in the house is good for repelling insects away.... Shifting cultivation has proved to be more beneficial to the forest than permanent agriculture. In addition the plots which are left fallow after three years of cultivation have proved to be the only grazing patches for wild herbivores—the thick forest where they get no grass to graze on' (p 179).

Both these instances demonstrate an openness to see geographical and cultural specificity. However, this by itself is not enough to take into account people's voices, their cultural practices and perceptions relating to nature. For instance, the reason for not discarding shifting cultivation is not that it provides grazing land; this is only a by-product of this mode of cultivation. The more important reason is that shifting cultivation is based on a method of reading and relating to nature which is opposite to the way industrial production relates to nature. The former may be referred to as an 'open relation' while the latter a 'closed relation' to nature. In an open relation to nature it is possible to uncover the medicinal and food properties of biodiversity; not so in a closed relation.

This is why conservation is not limited to collecting rare and threatened species. Rather, the more important agenda for conservation is to identify and learn the methods of reading and relating to forests such that knowledge about its biodiversity can be seen in the larger perspective of a non-vivisectionist view of nature. This dimension of conservation is concerned with the question of intellectual property rights and its bearing on culture. This aspect is not addressed by the studies on joint management, nor is it taken up in the proposals for managing protected areas. Some thoughts on this issue follow.

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) are today being upheld as a way to preserve and conserve knowledge about biodiversity and to make it available for industrial production. This is part of the larger processes of technological

globalisation which have contributed substantially to the destruction of the global ecosystem. Accordingly, mechanisms for acquiring Intellectual Property Rights contribute to the processes that have impaired the life-support systems of the forest dwellers and other rural poor. They, however, favour the pharmaceutical, and food and seed industries. Ethno-botanical research has in recent times focused on gaining access to the tribal dweller's knowledge about biodiversity. This knowledge is validated through a series of laboratory tests, patented under the IPR regime and thereafter used for industrial production.

Tribal forest dwellers have no active role to play in this process. On the contrary, their knowledge is so taken away that it seldom returns to them. This taking away further strengthens the processes that reduces them to mere wage labourers in the market.

Sharing profits that derive from such rights and patents are neither an adequate nor an appropriate measure to either preserve biodiversity or to stop the processes that erode their tradition. Sharing profits may raise their standards of living. However, it is unlikely that this will create conditions that can arrest the process of erosion.

It is observed that tribal youth is disinterested in its own traditions. As forest dwellers depend increasingly on the market for their livelihood, they acquire values alien to their way of life. These values create a discontinuity and impair social and cultural processes that are important for preservation and conservation, namely, transmission across generations. The market also generates a demand for biodiversity resources that is insensitive to the rates at which these resources are reproduced in nature. Most importantly, it undermines those social, cultural and religious practices related to their work culture that bring forest dwellers in close proximity to nature.

From such a standpoint the following questions need to be addressed: What steps are needed to sustain and enrich the social and cultural processes of production and reproduction of knowledge about the forest? In what way can this become the basis for self-rule? What are the cultural interventions that will recover the processes of transmission and reproduction of knowledge across generations? Finally, what is the political framework necessary to ensure that contributions to knowledge are not disturbed?

Savyasaachi

**ECOLOGY AND EQUITY: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India** by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha. Routledge, London and New York, 1995.

THIS volume consolidates the authors' work on natural resource use in India and its impact on the levels of living of the 'eco-system people' in relation to that of the elite. In fact it succeeds in doing more. It is a critique of our



development model followed in the 50 years since independence.

The book begins with an elucidation of the colonial paradigm—one of draining colonies of their natural resources in the interest of increased consumption. Towards this end the British set up an elaborate administrative and economic structure in India. This structure continued after independence: the Indian state took over from the colonial state with little effort to examine the appropriateness of prevailing institutions for economic management. Given the drive of the ruling classes for industrialisation and centralisation of power, this resulted in a cornering of the development benefits by the urban rich. The alternative paradigm of decentralisation and limited industrialisation as expounded by the Gandhians was given short-shrift. The consequence was development for the elite at the expense of the 'eco-system' people.

The first part of the book documents, resource by resource, how a conglomeration of factors governing the interactions of these two sets of people led to systematic deprivation of the eco-system people. The three routes through which profits accrued to industrialists were: (a) cheap access to power, water, land and raw materials. This became possible as the eco-system people, who have a vested interest in the sustainable use of local natural resources, were relegated to the periphery of the power structure; (b) cheap labour; and (c) capability to charge high prices for output. This happened in the case of several resources, that is water, coastal lands, grazing lands and forests. The emerging picture is graphic in its sweep and accurate in matters of detail.

After a brief excursion into the context of the environmental movements in the country, the authors proceed to offer a working synthesis that may provide a vision of the 'India that could be': empowerment of the people, proper valuation of resources and knowledge dissemination. The authors suggest this 'conservative-liberal-socialism' as an alternative paradigm of development philosophy, given the waning of Gandhianism and the collapse of the socialist model in other parts of the world. Since they concede that the philosophy of capitalism is on the ascendant, the overriding question that then emerges is: how does a policy of decentralised management of natural resources gel with the globalisation and outward orientation dominant in this economic philosophy? The authors of the present volume do not face this question squarely.

It is not possible to isolate communities or revive local institutions for natural resource management in the manner that they existed in the past. At the same time, some natural resources intrinsically require decentralized management. The challenge thus is one of evolving decentralised institutions which can establish links with the market, both national and international, as equal partners in development and trade, while absorbing traditional knowledge with respect to sustainable use. The level of use and the respon-

sibility for preservation needs to be determined locally. Simultaneously, possibilities of value addition at the local level have to be explored in a manner such that the benefits accrue to those who preserve resources.

Some tentative measures suggested by the authors that could lead in this direction are:

1) Empowerment of the eco-system people with an awareness and knowledge of the possibilities of development using local natural and other resources. This needs to be supplemented with a knowledge base that determines sustainable levels of extraction. Such levels could perhaps be determined through a merging of modern and traditional knowledge bases.

2) A proper valuation of natural resources and a policy perspective which takes this valuation into account. In some cases, such as medicinal plants, the determination of supply levels as discussed above will, of its own accord, determine prices.

3) Not all resources enter the market. Some resources may be used only at the local level. Here the demand may need to be controlled by local level decision-making. Population levels and growth and availability of alternative technology may then provide policy directions for limiting demand to levels of sustainable extraction.

The above suggestions are expected to facilitate the participation of the eco-system people in development. The authors expect these to contribute to a reduction in conflicts over natural resources and their inequitous use. However, each of these processes comprise a slow movement towards a distant goal. The rates at which empowerment and institutional change takes place is notoriously slow. Further, the levers of change are in hands interested in perpetuating the status quo. Nevertheless, it is expected that when the unrest caused by existing policy in the periphery permeates to the center, a felt need for an alternative vision of development will emerge.

One must remember, however, that this vision cannot be a backward looking one. It will have to keep the eco-system people in touch with world reality, in a sense keep them in the forefront (which they have been in their perception of ecological reality). The present volume, while providing a graphic picture of the present, stops short of providing a framework within which that macro level initiative could operate.

**Kanchan Chopra**

**ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS: People's Lives and Development Choices** by Sumi Krishna. Sage Publications, Delhi. 1996.

THE environment-development debate is undoubtedly one of the most crucial ones of the age. It touches on all aspects of human life, from the relation of one species to another and the planet that houses them all, to questions of values, philosophy and culture. There are those who believe that

we must not harm any other life-form and there are others who hold that humans (particularly 'man') were born to conquer nature. There are a few who call for a return to nature and some who seek in technology the answers to societal problems and still others who attempt to merge the two.

The debate gives rise to curious antagonisms for eventually, it is all about who controls access to resources and uses them for what. As the visible signs of environmental degradation – smog, stinking water, ill-health, vanishing wilderness, caged animals, non-degradable plastics, toxic chemicals – get worse, the debate too enlarges and all agencies of civil society are forced to take sides in the debate. Prime Ministers, judges, politicians, industrialists, journalists, unionists, oustees, activists, and the so-called person on the street – everyone, at some stage or the other, becomes an 'environmentalist'. Given the range of opinions and arguments, the lay person as well as the specialist could well be forgiven for seeking to make sense out of the multiple voices. Which is why Sumi Krishna's book on environmental politics is a timely addition to the student's shelf.

Written with an elegant turn of phrase, the book squarely addresses the question of why environmentalism has not had a greater impact on development policy and people's lives. Taking examples from villages in Haryana and Tamilnadu, Bihar and Bastar, Krishna illustrates how development processes marginalise the poor and how environmentalism does not provide space for people to make their own choices. Part 1 of the book deals with the various approaches of Indian environmentalism, an attempt 'to unravel the different strands of reasoning and emotion that shroud the environmental debate.' Differentiating between the popular, managerial and progressive approaches, she takes a critical look at the ideology and practice of the major strategies of institutional management, revival of tradition, women's and caste roles in nurturing bio-diversity, and community participation – leading to an examination of the dynamics of people's movements.

Part 2 takes up the question of how Indian environmentalism tackles the issues of population, technology – with particular emphasis on intensive agriculture and big dams – and sustainability. These issues are placed within the perspective of global interlinkages and historical developments in order to 'clear away some cobwebs.' Finally, in Part 3, there is an examination of the preoccupation with symbols rather than structures, of how the rhetoric and myths of environmentalism evolve, and how we can get beyond them. Krishna succinctly argues, 'By consistently avoiding analyses which define the conflict of class interests within different sections of rural or tribal society, environmentalism has subdued class conflicts... (and this) does not help our understanding of structures of inequality.' Thus, the author brings together the sociological and environmental debates and highlights four major areas of concern about environmentalism: the limited approach to gender, caste and class; the unconcern with establishing decentralised insti-

tutions (such as panchayats); the quest to imprison others (chiefly tribals) in tradition; and the unwillingness to create the necessary 'value orientations' in the people (to enlarge the range of choices).

These concerns are valid. They would be shared by many who may not even be environmentalists. They also point to the need to increase democratisation and decentralisation, for communities to seize the initiative to construct their own lives and for professionals to become more responsive in supporting such initiatives. The book is, therefore, very much a part of a growing tendency within activists and academics to introspect about their beliefs and to search for new insights in these troubled times. The book also puts forward a skeletal framework on which the concerns and insights could be moulded to give body to the environment-development nexus. It is, therefore, with some anticipation that one turns the pages – particularly given Krishna's background as a journalist who has been commenting on the environmental scene since the early '70s.

The anticipation, regrettably, is belied. There are many reasons for this, big and small. Different readers might view them differently. But perhaps three may be singled out as the principal ones.

First, there is the somewhat uneasy use of categories. In the beginning of the book, for instance, there is the division of environmentalists into three groups based on their approach. These three are the popular, managerial, and progressive groups. Popular environmentalism holds development to be the cause of environmental degradation, while managerial environmentalism regards it to be the cure for environmental problems. Progressive environmentalism is defined as being more concerned with the political questions of the structure of power. These categories promise to sort out some aspects of the debate. But immediately after offering them as analytical tools, Krishna clarifies that the 'ideological boundaries between the approaches remain fuzzy,' and goes on to allege that environmentalists 'think and talk about the environment in language that obscures rather than clarifies.' Now this is rather curious. To advance critical elements in one breath and then retreat from their purported criticality in the next is unlikely to aid the process of critical reasoning.

While Krishna explores the popular and managerial approaches at some length, one misses the same attention to detail in the case of the progressive one. Her reason is that this approach has 'tended to ignore environmental issues altogether.' There may be some merit in this, but I wonder if it can be an excuse for ignoring some of the more powerful voices of this approach. To characterise Fernandes, Bidwai, Kelkar, Nathan, and Dhagamwar as the principal structural analysts of the environment is perhaps carrying the principle of selectivity a little too far. Particularly when, for the major part of the book, these categories are by and large ignored and commentators get clubbed together as 'all', 'many', or 'some' environmentalists.

Coupled with this is a somewhat loose characterisation of the comments themselves. Thus Ramanth is being 'romantic' when he terms the administration's relationship to the forest as imposed and parasitic while the Adivasis' is inherent and symbiotic; Thomas is 'illuminating' when he suggests that transient and vulnerable man is embedded in a nature opaque to probability, impermeable to death; while the Dalai Lama is 'relevant' when he comments that traditional people have an inner development, a sense of warm-heartedness and contentment, that we would all do well to emulate. Similarly, Elwin's advocacy of a protected area for tribals is 'unfortunately phrased', while his support for tribal rights in land and forest is 'thoughtfully formulated'. Such categorisation does not quite lead to greater clarity.

Second, there is some hesitation in the matter of analytical technique—somewhat like a batsman offering his blade for the drive but not following through. Krishna takes on many of the notables in the environmental firmament—Shiva, Guha, Gadgil, Agrawal and Narain. This itself is a laudable act, for there is no denying the need for a thorough dissection of the issues. But meeting one assertion with another will hardly control what Krishna calls the 'stridency' of the dialogue. For example, Guha and Gadgil's thesis that the framework of castes is a cultural adaptation to resource use cannot really be critically examined by a statement that the 'nexus between an ecological space and an occupational group... changes in response to technology, spread of markets, population pressure, education, and so on.' Particularly when the debate is taking place in the context of a particular social structure developed many centuries ago. Similarly Shiva's notion that women's ecological role is biologically determined cannot be adequately challenged by opining that 'resonances between biology and culture do not mean that biological or ecological explanations lie at the root of all socio-economic processes....'

Equally inadequate is the tendency to generalise on the basis of a few examples. Thus, two instances of infanticide in the case of Lambadis and Todas are cited to argue that 'both infanticide and gerontocide were socially sanctioned methods of population stabilisation' and that 'painful and desperate choices' were necessary to maintain equilibrium with food supply. Similarly, because an entire village could never congregate at one time and one place during the period of Krishna's village Chhatera reportage (when there were no panchayat elections in Haryana), referendum to a gram sabha is seen to be 'unrealistic' and the only option is that 'decision-making has to be through democratic representation'—where the viable democratic body is the panchayat. Even the debate on big dams is settled through reference to a single large dam—Nagarjunasagar. The conclusion is that the experience was 'neither an unmitigated disaster nor a resounding success,' and that this 'is likely to be so with other large dams as well.' Such

'balanced' views are appropriate only when they consider the larger body of literature available on the subject.

Third, and this is perhaps the most serious drawback, Krishna does not consistently obey her own prescription for structural analysis of class interests in society. Thus, the tribals in Bastar are recognised as not a homogeneous group, but the struggles over pine plantations and mining in the region are not analysed on the basis of different interests within the tribals. Similarly, the 'villagers' in Dehradun affected by both the opening and the closing of the mines are subsumed within the general category of 'people', even though it is acknowledged that 'initial variations (in inequality) do matter.' The linkages between feminism, patriarchy, caste, and class are obviously too complex to be explored in any detail in a book of this kind, but surely a mention of these linkages would have added to its thematic content.

Krishna provides a valuable service in attempting to demystify the Chipko movement. But she stops short at unearthing the play of social and economic interests. The observation that Chipko has been transformed into an environmental icon is certainly appealing. But if 'progressive economists and political groups tended to dismiss Chipko' then how did it become an icon? And, once it did become an icon, while the movement itself struggled to maintain a certain momentum, why did the economic and political issues re-emerge in the Uttarakhand agitation? And why did this agitation as well as the anti-mining struggle not attract the same kind of public attention? Did journalism practised at the time, along with the interest groups who comprised the media managements and the readership, have a role to play in both kinds of iconography? These are questions that are not even posed, far less tackled.

Because of this lack of self-prescribed incisiveness, Krishna is able to opine that the assumption that environmental outcomes are 'the deliberate result of nefarious administrative designs... is actually giving the government too much credit,' and that the adoption of new agricultural technology is not 'some kind of invidious plot, introduced with the intention of making the rich richer and the poor poorer.' This is somewhat at odds with observations such as 'there is unrelenting pressure of the interests of big business,' and farmers are 'vulnerable to fluctuations in inputs over which they have no control.' Of particular interest is the reference to M.S. Swaminathan's Presidential address to the Agricultural Sciences section of the Indian Science Congress at Varanasi in 1968. A paragraph is quoted in full from the address wherein Swaminathan warns of the dangers of the initiation of exploitative agriculture 'without a proper understanding of the various consequences.' This is to prove that the environmentally adverse impact of intensive agriculture 'was anticipated from the very beginning.' What is not cited is that this particular paragraph is only a minor portion of Swaminathan's address which was full of the wonders of 'a major agricultural transformation.' What is not recognised is that in the entire discussion in that

section of the Congress, only two of the many speakers referred in any way to the social impacts of the technology and there was no further discussion of the matter. What is not discussed either is that Swaminathan continued to occupy major positions in the Ministry of Agriculture and the Planning Commission and, even then, his 'awareness did not have any impact on Indian policy and practice.' Why was this so? An exploration of the social underpinnings of this question would have illuminated the principal theme of the book.

At the end, Krishna illustrates the need to redirect environmentalism by recounting the example of a young girl in the Garhwal Himalaya who asserted that one day the track to her village would be made *pucca*; one day she would ride a bicycle to school. This is a beautiful metaphor but, sadly, it only replaces one kind of symbolism with another. In an age when notions of roads and transport and education are all under review – as much as notions of gender, caste, and class – it would be a great pity if the debate stopped there. Perhaps one can look forward to Krishna's next book to break through this journalistic barrier.

Dunu Roy

**DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT AND THE COUNTRYSIDE: Urban Rural Struggles in India**  
by Ashutosh Varshney. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1995.

DESPITE the predominantly rural character of our economy and society, charges that our planning and policy-making process is marked by a pronounced urban bias are not uncommon. In fact, there is a feeling that the levers of power are controlled by an urban industrial elite, not just neglectful of our countryside, but of actually setting into motion processes that convert the vast rural hinterland into an 'internal colony'.

It is routinely asserted that Nehru and his ilk were but westerners in Indian garb and that under Fabian socialist influences, promoted a growth strategy based on heavy industry. And while the Indian countryside may not have been as neglected and disarticulated as in many other countries, primarily because of our democratic character, the theory of urban bias holds. Be it technical and esoteric debates on plan allocations on terms of trade between agriculture and industry or between rural and urban areas, or the more charged slogans of *Bharat vs India* or *bahishkrit samaj vs paschimbkrit samaj* – an impressive line up of critics, from Lohia and Charan Singh to Devi Lal and Mulayam Singh Yadav (in the field of politics) or Dhananjay Gadgil to Michael Lipton to V.M. Dandekar, have tried to privilege the rural-urban axis as the fulcrum of our political economy. In the monograph under review, Ashutosh Varshney, political scientist from Harvard, too joins these ranks.

What is intriguing is the sturdiness of this charge, despite evidence to the contrary. In these days of post-modernism, one expects all analytical categories and meta-narratives to be subjected to an incisive unpacking. And while one cannot deny that vast tracts of our countryside remain underdeveloped or that basic services are highly inequitously distributed between urban and rural areas, to uncritically accept categories like rural/urban without exploring their internal differentiation – of class, caste, ethnicity, gender, location – or examining cross-sectoral linkages, does appear methodologically fallacious.

Yes, city dwellers as a whole are privileged, but only in an abstract way. One cannot seriously argue for any commonality of interests among slum dwellers, informal sector workers, factory workers, and the upper classes. Similarly, to not give analytical significance to the basic contradictions between landed and the landless, or absentee landowners and the rest, classifying all of them as bound by a common interest, is unsustainable. At this broad level, Varshney's thesis holds little explanatory power.

The best argued chapters in this book relate to the evolution of India's agricultural policies. In Varshney's re-construction, the Nehru years were marked not just by an urban-industrial bias, but by a land reform/cooperatives based institutional strategy for agricultural growth. In was as if once rural inequities were lowered, the peasant proprietor would take-off. As is by now well recognised, this strategy ran into serious trouble by the mid-sixties. Not only did the country go through a series of famines, the reliance on imported food and rising food prices placed a serious constraint on further development.

Equally interesting is his tracing of the process leading to the formulation of the new agricultural strategy or green revolution. Under the inspired leadership of C. Subramaniam and technical experts, it was decided to concentrate resources in areas of assured irrigation and provide a seed-fertiliser-pesticide and credit package to the better-off farmers. This was combined with a positive price incentive to producers. The overall impact of this package was a dramatic increase in food production.

How exactly was this shift effected? Unlike many who saw in this new input (mainly imported) based strategy an American hand through interventions by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, Varshney convincingly demonstrates that the primary impetus was national. Of course, the fact that this new thinking fitted into global thinking helped, for evidently without US backing the green revolution may not have taken off. Incidentally, on reading the acrimonious debates of the sixties, one realises how positions across the ideological spectrum have remained frozen. The current wranglings over the structural adjustment policy are couched in the same language.

It helped that this new strategy was supported by the provincial Congress leaders, a process that Varshney sees as symptomatic of a growing rural influence in our plan-

ning apparatus. The setting up of the Agricultural Prices Commission, government interventions in the input and output markets, the debates between the micro and macro views on Indian agriculture, are all competently presented.

One, however, has difficulty with the unabashed admiration that Varshney expresses for the new strategy. It is as if the earlier strategy of the fifties had no merit or that those who pushed that line were advocates of an urban interest. Similarly, to paint the shift as a democratic victory of the rural masses over an urban-elite is, to put it mildly, misplaced. Critics had pointed to both the foreign exchange and equity (both regional and class) implications of this strategy. Not only have many of these apprehensions proven correct, they have been buttressed by an ecological critique that points to an essential unsustainability of the new strategy.

While Varshney does analyse the fiscal constraints of our agricultural strategy – the burden placed on the state exchequer by a mix of subsidised inputs, support prices for agricultural outputs and subsidised issue prices for the consumer – he either misses out or seeks to minimise the importance of the other issues. Possibly this is because entertaining the class dimension would diminish the claim of unified rural interests. This is most marked in his analysis of the impact of high prices and his claim that all rural producers, even if they are net consumers of foodgrains, favour higher support prices.

Politically, one can see the post-green revolution years as representing an increasing accommodation of the interests of the surplus producing farmers. If anything, the earlier surpluses generated by the new strategy provided the needed clout to this class to extend its hold over the policy-making apparatus, at least partly through the price based struggles led by Sharad Joshi, Nanjundaswamy, Rudrappa Naidu and Mahendra Singh Tikait. This could explain why, notwithstanding massive foodgrain stocks in our warehouses and the unbearable burden of the different subsidies on inputs and outputs, attempts to reduce them or tax agricultural incomes are so stoutly resisted.

Varshney's analysis of the price struggles of the '70s and '80s is also debatable. That they were successful in influencing policy agenda is not in doubt but the claim that the poorer strata were active participants is shaky. The reason why these movements faded out after the mid-eighties is not just because issues of 'interest' had been overtaken by those of 'identity' but because these struggles always had a limited agenda. It is the inability of these struggles/movements to successfully incorporate the concerns of the less well-off in the countryside which is responsible for their eclipse. And nothing marks this better than the dismal failure of these leaders once they entered the electoral-political arena. Possibly, once the issues were successfully mainstreamed into policy, they lost their *raison-d'être*.

Even more damaging for Varshney's thesis that the countryside shares a common economic interest is the

completely divergent positions taken by the leaders of the earlier price based agitations on the current structural adjustment and liberalisation strategy of the nineties. So while we have a Sharad Joshi not only supporting the new GATT resolutions on agriculture, trying to muster support for an extension of the Intellectual Property Regime for seeds, welcoming agri-business in the country and asking for a complete abolition of restrictions on the movement of agricultural produce – both within and outside the country; his one-time fellow-travellers – Tikait and Nanjundaswamy are vociferous in their anti-GATT and anti-liberalisation fulminations. Nanjundaswamy not only attacked the offices of Cargill Seeds but also outlets like Kentucky Fried Chicken. Clearly their visions of rural India differ sharply. Maybe instead of only focusing on Rajiv Gandhi and Tikait as symbols of urban-rural conflicts, if Varshney had understood the real cleavages marking our countryside, he would have come up with a more plausible thesis.

Varshney is correct in arguing that the current policy-mix of technological improvement coupled with price incentives seems to have reached its limits, at least for foodgrains. One also agrees that the 'higher prices, larger subsidies and loan waivers' model needs to be replaced by a strategy of cost-cutting and infrastructural improvement. Such a shift is, however, unlikely to come from the strata that has been the main beneficiary of the earlier strategy. It is Varshney's inability to see this limitation, given his consistent collapsing of the farm into rural and the surplus generating peasantry as representative of the entire countryside, that causes disquiet. In the end, therefore, what this book presents is not an analysis of urban-rural struggles (whatever they might be) but of the assertions of richer peasants to extract greater advantages from the state, unfortunately with little regard for consequences.

Harsh Sethi

#### **INDIA: Economic Development and Social Opportunity**

by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.

DID you ever think that India, this glorious subcontinent of ours, could be compared to sub-Saharan Africa and be found wanting? 'Gender inequalities,' we are reliably informed by Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze, 'tend to be larger in India than in sub-Saharan Africa, and are responsible for extremely high levels of female deprivation.' Moreover, 'the two regions are not very different in terms of either adult literacy or infant mortality.' (p. 31)

Using such shock tactics to shake us out of our apathy, Sen and Dreze in the volume under review argue that though Nehru, a man of vision, had declared 'the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity' as the task ahead for independent India, the record of Indian economic development on the matter of



enhancing social opportunities such as education, health care, social security and other related 'entitlements' has been abysmal. The reason for this 'monumental neglect of social inequalities and deprivations' is to be sought not only in the omissions of government policy, as many commentators have already done, but more importantly in the lack of public action, debate and involvement at large with these issues.

Sen and Dreze, who have now collaborated for nearly a decade, have tried 'to analyze the task of economic development in a broad perspective, in which social as well as economic opportunities have central roles.' As the title suggests, their main concern is with 'social opportunity', the enhancement of which does not depend on economic growth alone. Surprisingly, however, the word does not figure in the index.

Their basic thesis is that an expansion of basic human capabilities will not only influence the quality of life that the Indian people can enjoy, but that they also affect the real opportunities the people have to participate in economic expansion. Thus, the authors argue that the lack of initiative towards a radical change in social policies simultaneously with the economic reforms begun in 1991 is a major failure and will affect not only the prospects of improving living conditions but also the chances of success of the market reforms themselves! Having lost this opportunity India is in some danger of emulating the divisive pattern of growth visible in Brazil, rather than the more participatory one of countries like South Korea.

The lesson emerging from the diverse investigations by Sen and Dreze is the imperative need to take the debate on contemporary Indian political economy beyond the confines of the pros and cons of mere *economic* reform to more 'basic and urgent' issues of public policy viz., basic education, elementary health care and social security. Citizens too must contribute to this through public debate, self-help groups and through influencing the agenda of the government. Only such a wide perspective will help us understand the obstacles to economic development in India and the reasons why public policy has failed to resolve them.

This general approach is based on empirical findings drawn from international comparisons and inter-state comparisons which are elaborated in chapters three and four. Given the enormous regional variations in the Indian development experience, there is much to be learnt 'by India from India.' In particular, the study focuses on the role of basic education in social and economic transformation, the importance of women's agency in bringing about major changes and that of social and political movements in challenging deep-seated inequalities.

The extensive inter-state data provided as supportive evidence in this book is drawn from a companion volume, prepared and edited by the authors for WIDER with the title 'Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives' (OUP, 1996). It presents comprehensive studies of the

Indian development experience and focuses in particular on three states – Kerala, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh.

This thesis sounds disarmingly simple for it conceals the fact, except from the perceptive reader who will look at the footnotes, bibliographical details and appendices, that what underlies it is years of arduous, painstaking, meticulous research. When you read beyond the preface you realize that its simplicity stems from the fact that we are already familiar with many of the concepts and arguments incorporated therein which Sen, and later, Sen and Dreze have evolved over time.

Precision and clarity have been Sen's hallmark from the beginning. I have long admired Sen's ability to enter an area of controversy, rearrange the terms of the debate, create imaginative new phrases which leave an indelible imprint on the mind, evolve more meaningful categories, weave all the various aspects and sub-arguments into a central overarching logic or theme of debate – thereby creating a rich texture of nuances and resonances, enriching in the process the subject matter of economics. For instance, his analysis of the question of employment involved the creation of the innovative category – the recognition aspect of employment – in addition to the conventional income and production aspects, allowing thereby for the possibility of someone who has a job but still considers herself to be unemployed. Terms like 'missing women', 'entitlements', 'capabilities', so familiar to us now, are part of their evolved vocabulary.

Sen, a philosopher-economist (to use Meier's term for him), was equally incisive about poverty. More than a decade ago, Sen had pointed out that the most important thematic deficiency of traditional development economics lay in its concentration on national product, aggregate income and total supply of particular goods rather than on 'entitlements' of people and the 'capabilities' these entitlements generate. For Sen, the process of economic development has ultimately to be concerned with 'what people can or cannot do.' Only a front-runner like him could wander fearlessly away from the number-crunching boredom of positive economics to the normative and supplement the biological concept of 'absolute deprivation' with the sociological one of 'relative deprivation' to provide poverty and inequality a more meaningful and qualitative content.

That the development process affects people differentially was commonplace in left discourse which emphasized its *class* bias. Sen and Dreze have extended this understanding of bias in distribution to other categories like social groups, gender, caste, region, state and so on. This may perhaps be disconcerting to the left, especially when their terms of reference are, so to speak, adopted (or appropriated, if you prefer) by institutions like the World Bank and thrown back at them in the form of 'safety nets' as an essential part of structural adjustment packages!

The subsequent chapters clarify the relationship between the government, the state and the market by dif-

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The subsequent chapters clarify the relationship between the government, the state and the market by dif-

ferentiating between market-excluding and market-complementary interventions and the acts of commission and omission in the respective roles of market and non-market institutions. Having identified capability with the freedom to choose a way of life, they spell out how education and health, which have both intrinsic as well as instrumental importance, in addition to gender, region and caste specificity, contribute to this freedom.

Another major contribution of this book has been to restore a sense of reality and perspective to the question of gender relations in a patriarchal society. Trivialising the concerns of serious gender injustice, some metropolitan-based, jetsetting, elite subaltern feminists, linked to global feminism, would have us believe that the central problem of women in our times is the repressed, oppressed, suppressed or depressed (take your pick) sexuality of the female species. What we should be looking at is the gender injustice *within* families as also the link between female education and fertility. The evidence presented proves that the drastic decline in female-male ratio is more on account of excess female mortality between the ages of one and five. This clearly points to the relative neglect of the female child by the family than the more commonly perceived reasons such as female infanticide or foeticide or even the politically charged one of Muslim influence.

Research usually adds to knowledge at an incremental pace but at some point a body of work acquires a critical mass which radically changes and enlarges the frontiers of a discipline. This deeply inspiring book needs to be read carefully, not only by academics and policy-makers, but also by activists who endeavour to make this world a happier place to live in.

**Rajul Mathur**

**INDIAN DEVELOPMENT: Selected Regional Perspectives** edited by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997.

**INDIA: Economic Development and Social Opportunity** edited by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.

**THE INTELLIGENT PERSON'S GUIDE TO LIBERALISATION** by Amit Bhaduri and Deepak Nayyar, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1996.

FIFTY years of independence and democracy, with 50 per cent of the entire population and 60 per cent of women above 15 years who still cannot read or write and nearly 40 per cent households still in poverty. It is, therefore, reassuring that some of the leading analysts of the Indian economic scene have pinned their faith on democracy as the mainstay of India's future economic development. The books under review are about India's development experience: its

achievements in the past and its future. For Amit Bhaduri and Deepak Nayyar, the concern is with the recent past, the trajectory of development since liberalisation, viewed from the vantage point of the common people in India and their pressing needs. Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze wish to go 'beyond liberalisation' and the current debates, to the goals and tasks spelled out by Nehru in his 'tryst with destiny': 'the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity'.

The three books are thus about the objectives of development and of India's successes and failures in meeting these objectives. The strategies pursued in the recent, or not so recent, past matter in as much as they are 'means' to the 'ends' of development.

The distinction between 'means' and 'ends' are critical to the understanding put forward by Dreze and Sen here and elsewhere. In their view, one way of seeing development is in terms of the expansion of the real freedom that citizens enjoy to pursue the objectives they have reason to value. In this sense, the expansion of human capability can be broadly seen as the central feature of development. The notion of capability expresses the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead. In this sense education, good health, economic improvement lead to increase in capabilities. The expansion of human capabilities is clearly enhanced by economic growth but many other influences also work in this direction and, moreover, the nature of growth is also critically important. In general, participatory growth processes would allow social opportunities to grow at a faster rate. But drawing from international and regional experience (from the companion volume), Dreze and Sen show that a high level of literacy and education, gender equality, and a greater degree of social and economic equality are much more conducive of participatory growth.

Both Dreze-Sen and Bhaduri-Nayyar see the current debate on 'state versus market' as a false dichotomy. Bhaduri and Nayyar find a number of parallels between the state and market: both state and market are social institutions; both are fallible and indeed do fail in a number of situations; and markets, as much as governments, need careful monitoring and deliberate correction. The state and the market are, by and large, not substitutes; instead they complement one another in many spheres. The relationship between the two institutions should be flexible and adaptive, and essentially one of co-operation. The primary task of the state should be to develop the social and physical infrastructure. Similarly, Dreze and Sen show the mutuality between governments and markets. They describe government interventions as 'market excluding' and 'market complementary' and find a large role for sensible market complementary approaches. The main concern here is not that governments do too much or too little, but that they may do much of the wrong things and too little of the right. In India, the overactivity of governments in some fields has been inseparably accompanied

by underactivity in others. This conclusion is also echoed by Bhaduri and Nayyar.

The correction of the 'negative' role of the state and the dismantling of the excessive, and often perverse, regulations finds general agreement among the authors as also the greater use of trade and openness. But Bhaduri and Nayyar go on to conclude that the results of economic reforms since 1991 had little to commend themselves either in terms of their own objectives (reduction of deficit and inflation and increase in exports) or in their impact on human development, the country's technological capability and reduction of regional disparities, or a proposed 'litmus test' in terms of improvement in the living conditions of the poor. Dreze and Sen agree that the specific content of reform needs to be debated upon but in their view reforms need not necessarily be iniquitous or employment-reducing, and external liberalisation and trade could lead to substantial benefits without jeopardising the country's sovereignty. Their main criticism of the reform programme is that it does not give sufficient importance to the ends of development – improvement in human capability through education, health and participatory growth processes.

How can a greater match be achieved between people's needs and governmental action? This requires a closer look at the stuff that states are made of, the nature of political processes, and the relationship between governments and people. One of the strengths of India, both sets of authors agree, is the resilience of its democratic framework.

According to Dreze and Sen, political freedom has intrinsic value. But democracy, however flawed, also introduces some checks and balances in the way in which governments tend to function. Public outcry through various democratic institutions – the parliament, the press etc. could check extreme aberrations in policy, something which is not possible under authoritarian forms of government. They compare the outcome of famine situations in India and China. In the latter, misdirected policies and suppression of information regarding the famine situation in 1958-61 slowed governmental response and led to horrendous human consequences in terms of mass starvations and deaths. In India, on the other hand, a strong outcry over reports of starvation have led to a quicker governmental response, preventing mass disaster.

However, endemic deprivation, in the form of malnutrition, the poor status of health or education, and persistent inequalities, which have more complex causes, cause less manifest concern and both governments and people can simply learn to co-exist with these problems without raising a strong outcry. Governmental apathy and mis-direction can, however, be changed by public action, interpreted in the widest sense as action by the people and Dreze-Sen explore the outcomes of diverse forms of public action, brought out in the regional case studies of the companion volume.

One of the lessons from Indian regional experience emerging from the studies of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal

and Kerala by Jean Dreze, Harris Guzder, Sunil Sengupta and V.K. Ramchandran is that the interrelationship between governmental and public action can result in both 'vicious' and 'virtuous' cycles. The maldevelopment of Uttar Pradesh, according to them, is clearly a case of both governmental and public apathy (or at least not enough of the right kind of public action). On the other hand, public action at various levels and over a long period of time in Kerala, and organised political action on behalf of, and by, the poorer classes in West Bengal had, in interaction with more recent state policies, led to a diminution of persistent inequalities. But in Kerala the enormous increase in social opportunity had not been accompanied by sufficient growth because of the general mistrust of market based opportunities, and in West Bengal peoples' mobilisation had not been sufficiently well directed at raising social opportunity through a concerted attack of illiteracy, ill-health and women's agency.

In Bhaduri's and Nayyar's view, the state is not benign but represents the interests of the dominant economic and social classes that constitute the ruling elite. The paramount strength of the political system in India is democracy. But in a democracy the state needs legitimisation from the people, most of whom are poor. Parties competing for power thus need to appear responsive to people's needs and people can also convert their needs into political agendas. There are two ways in which the functioning of the government can be made more responsive. This is by improving transparency in the functioning of government at all levels and increasing accountability. One of the ways in which accountability can be improved is by improving the sharing of information between the government and the people.

Dreze and Sen suggest that transparency, accountability, and perhaps also efficiency of government can also be improved through decentralisation and devolution. The West Bengal study by Sengupta and Gazdar shows how rural panchayats in Bengal could play an effective though limited role. Dreze and Sen believe that the 73rd Amendment provides some of the preconditions for devolution but effective conditions for participation required an attack (as the Dreze-Gazdar study on U.P. shows) on persistent socio-economic inequalities.

What are the main lessons from all this? First, authoritarian and coercive governments may get it right for a time but they can also be disastrously wrong. Democracies are messier but safer. But democratic governments are unlikely to attack social and economic inequalities head-on. Wider public action may, however, directly tackle illiteracy, inequality, redress the balance of forces and help to accelerate policy changes. Second, reforms do not have a universal prescription, they need to address themselves both to governments and markets and the success and failures of policies need to be tested against well-grounded objectives of development.

**Ravi Srivastava**

# Communication

THAT *Seminar* should bring out a special issue on Bihar (The State of Bihar, February 1997 no. 450) is not something I was willing to take for granted, even if the 'the problem' did not care to justify or explain the long, pointing finger. Kashmir, Punjab, North East, yes, of course, but then why not Madhya Pradesh, Haryana or Pondicherry? I did however realise that an issue on Haryana or Madhya Pradesh may startle and even annoy the readers of *Seminar*, who might wonder if the journal was suddenly and uncharacteristically starved of worthy issues. To come a full circle then, *Seminar* is afterall justified in making a special issue of Bihar, as it does not surprise anyone. But why?

On a symbolic level Bihar is a part of our national selves that we would like to promptly jettison in the 1990s – the unlettered crude rusticity, the whiny vernacular register, the mustard oil in the hair, a compulsive allegiance to caste, an ego burdened with heavy doses of sycophancy and violence, a ritualism without belief in reason, and of course a genius for turning the greatest gifts of European Enlightenment into the rank slush of buffalo-sheds. Bihar reminds the sleek, modern terrier of his slovenly bovine self. Bihar in brief is a temple meant solely for sacrilege. Let me explain this literary puzzle with some prosaic sociology.

Over a period of time I have been convinced that the Bihari identity is the same as the moment of shame and angst that go with admitting it. I am otherwise unable to define the Bihari identity, either in brief or at length, even though I have a fairly lucid idea of my Bhojpuri identity, and could go on about it till everyone else goes to sleep. Biharis do not call themselves Biharis, except as a mob. For example, when Biharis seriously claim their dominance over Delhi University, it is not through a pious unity, but by staging a primeval Bhumihar-Rajput duel. The purpose is to impose exotic Bihari categories on the bewildered Delhi student. I wonder if a student from Delhi School would regard this as worthy of a research paper, or would fieldwork in an obscure district seem a more reliable bet?

The moment of shame I mentioned earlier is however the story of my own generation and is admittedly dated. In came Laloo Yadav and this brooding shame was transformed into a very complex form of pride. When pride is complex, it makes a bad antonym for shame, of course.

Laloo worked his assignment on two levels. First by humbling the higher castes and asserting the Yadav pride which is at least vicariously enjoyed by all other middle and lower castes. The urban and rural elite could



always come running to Delhi as refugees from a land of barbarity, and that does relieve the shame somewhat. But it is Laloo's second assignment which makes him an enduring enigma – this is a Laloo that sits on a buffalo's back and controls the huge engine of modernism in all its aspects. We have seen populist colossi like MGR, NTR, Jayalalitha and Bal Thackeray – who all drew on tradition from a decidedly modern, urban locus. But Laloo's is an image of the exaggeratedly ultra-rural cowherd who carries state power in a milkpail with utter aplomb. Acquiring mastery over modern statecraft, politics and technology is not his chief purpose though. It is to tease us with the proposition that modernism is far from being a great ideal, and that it is a ruthlessly dirty game – an evolutionary strategy devised by the fittest to win the battle of survival. This is why Laloo never stops reminding us that he is the fittest amongst them all. He has definitely thrown out the 'fittest' population from Bihar, as the great Bihari diaspora proves.

Laloo has introduced in the hypocritical pseudo-idealistic, political culture of ours, what might be called a 'politics of hilarity'. The only possible precedent may be the now-forgotten Raj Narayan from Varanasi. Laloo is a funny man with a sense of humour that has tragic proportions. He laughs at the humiliated Brahmin, Rajput and Bhumihar – and I may join him in this with a guilty 'Tripathy' titter. But when Laloo laughs at democratic values and institutions as mere bullocks to be yoked, I feel scared. Laloo is much too busy tormenting the beasts of (a) Brahminism and (b) English-speaking modernity to know where he is heading. While he tortures the modern institutions like an infant sadist he guffaws without realizing that he is leading his own caste and the state of Bihar over a moral precipice. Will this be the way the Yadavas go, in an end-20 century version of the Mahabharat?

The raw, comic energy of Laloo is what fascinates us all. I find that unnerving and even boring – it was a common character trait in our families, when I grew up, and I now regard it as the gaga humour of utter anomie. I personally feel I would have to invest a lot more intellect in unraveling a glum, fat, pompous and self-righteous image like Jayalalitha's, who seems more complex to me as a 'Puratchi Thalaivi'.

If Bihar and Laloo seems endlessly fascinating to the city-slicker, the reason is the image of the merry, amoral boor who will disrupt a discussion on Derrida by quoting a Magahi proverb and seem unselfconscious about it. When challenged, he will pull out a fake Ph.D. degree from a university blacklisted by the UGC, and glower at you. He will gatecrash into McDonald's and insist on having a *litti-chokha* too. And of course, when cornered, he will speak of democratic rights and puzzle your sense of time, space and context. It all seems very

funny till you see the deep pathos and shame which go with a history layered with civilization and re-barbarization. Just juxtapose the two Nalandas – the ancient university and the modern so-called. Compare the two 'humble farmers' too. The 'humble farmer' at the helm of our affairs just now is no Laloo. Even at a young age Deve, Gowda took up contracts to build little culverts and roads to make money. Laloo's bridges exist only on paper, and his money springs from non-existent merchandise such as fodder. Laloo's executive talents belong purely in the realm of speech – jokes, proverbs and audacious wisecracks.

Despite all this, I firmly believe that the moment we all stop declaring Bihar as the mysterious other, and own it up, a good part of the mystery will vanish instantly. Our own sense of identity will also become less fidgety and desperate. The West in any case looks at us as basically Laloos, despite our English, our democracy, industry, scientific manpower and what have you. There was a time when we produced Nehrus and Jinnahs, but now we only have Gowdas, Laloos and Mulayams, and should feel contented with that. And with likely personalities such as Miss Patna, Miss Ranchi, and Miss Monghyr, too.

Bihar may seem like a mess to an outsider, but it is no wasteland. Recently a Chamar *rikshawallah* in Delhi told me that for the last five years the village *halwai* does the cooking for their wedding feasts, which are attended by Rajputs and Brahmin neighbours. For me this is more than routine social change; it is a radical transformation. This is the gentle, poignant side of the Naxalism, Ranbir Sena and Sunlight Sena. Laloo Yadav is smart enough to know that he is the one who presides over this 'development', and everything else is paperwork, and it doesn't matter. Psychoanalytically it is quite interesting that when Laloo talks of his childhood, he mentions bodily cuts, bruises, sprains and bleeding, till he reaches the point of the JP movement in the '70s. It is this kind of life-story that is being healed in Bihar. It has to sit tight in a bandage before it can connect with the glory of Nalanda and Pataliputra.

The trouble is that in a story crammed with pastoral images, we the 'cream' of Bihar can take an outside peek at this process. Being a participant is tough in a state where salaries come late by eight or nine months. It is for the resident Laloos of the coming generations to heal the sufferings disguised by the bragging epigrams. Let us say that they owe it to Hema Malini's cheeks, if not the wrinkled bellies and foreheads of the distressed millions.

**Ratnakar Tripathy**  
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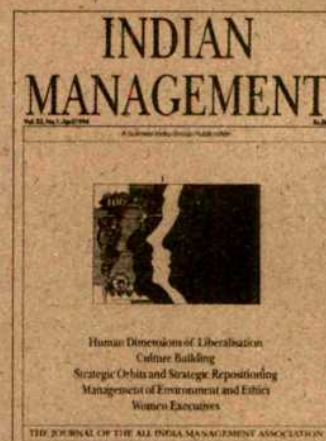
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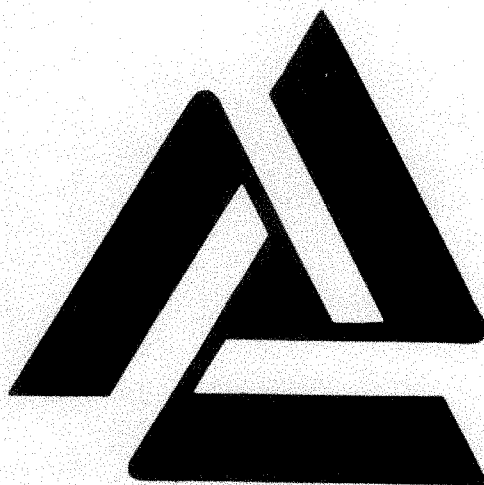
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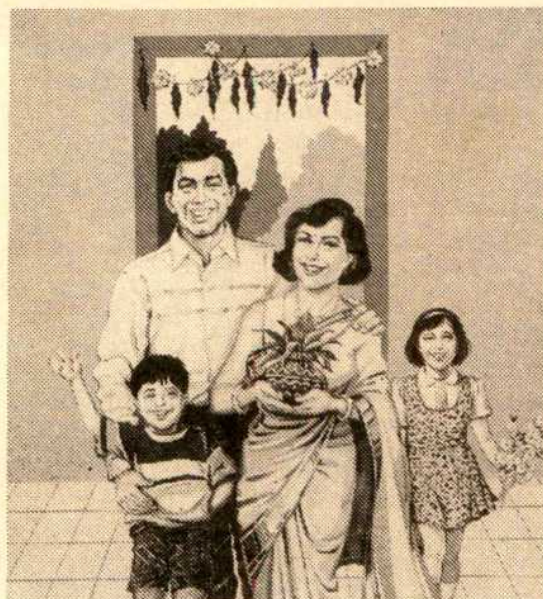
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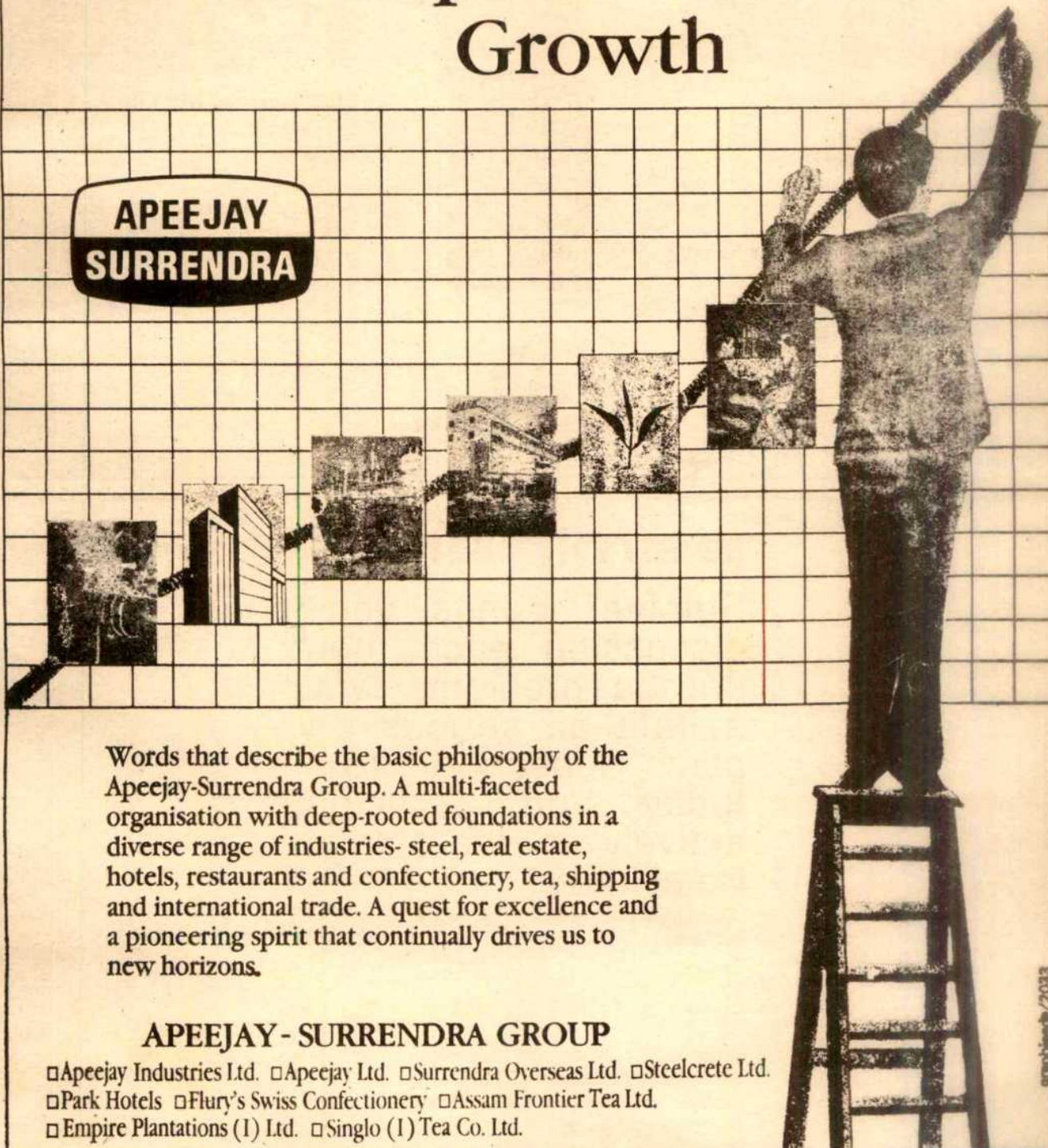
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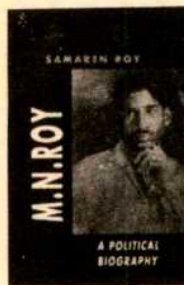
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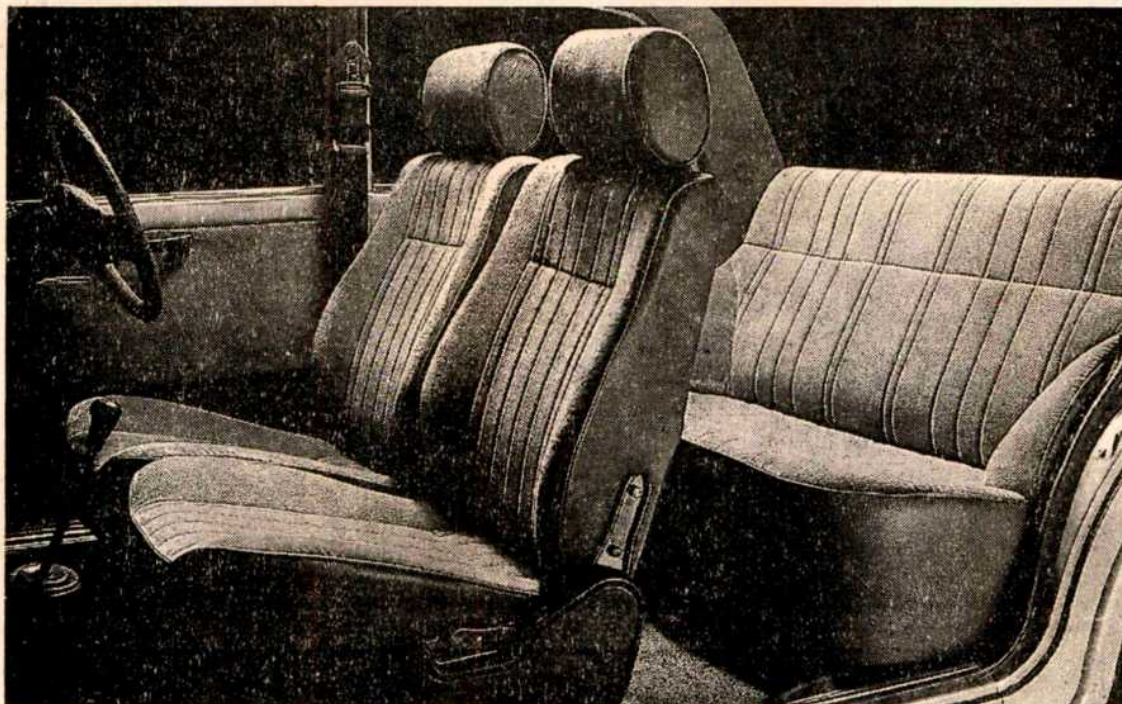
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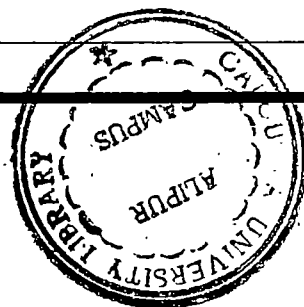


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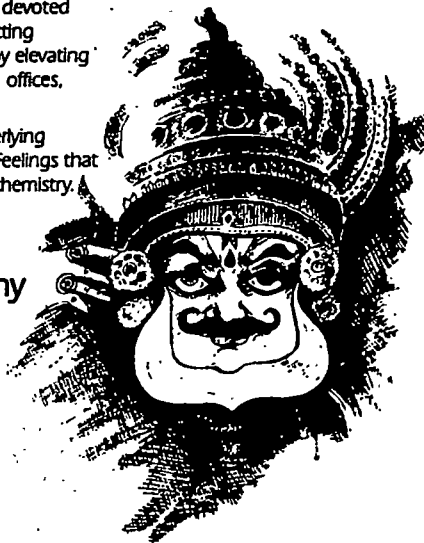
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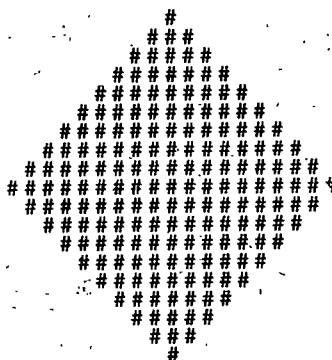
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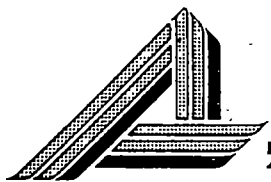
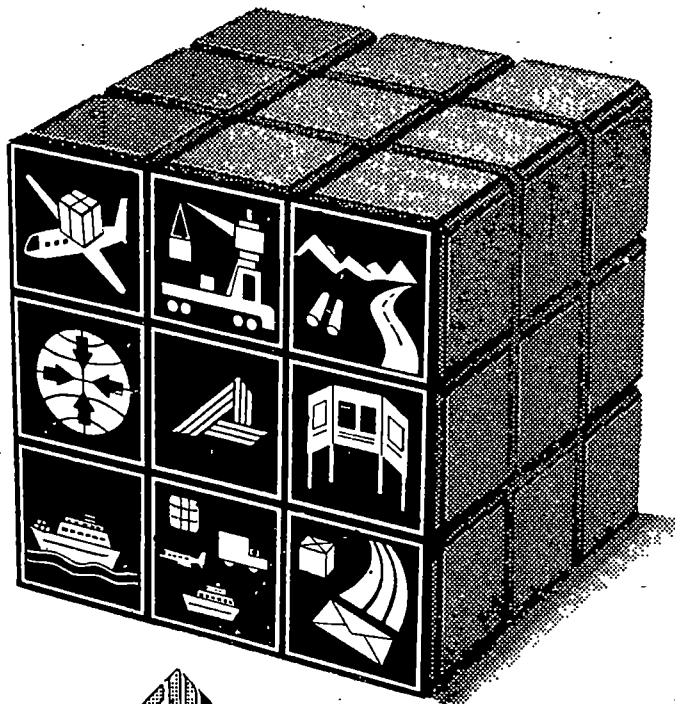
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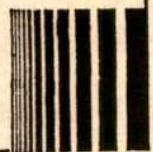
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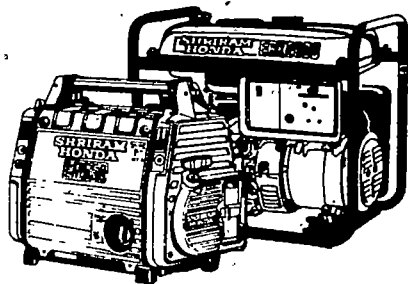
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Single copy: Rs.12    Yearly: Rs.125; £21; \$32    Three year: Rs.350; £52; \$80    Reproduction of material prohibited unless permitted

## NEXT MONTH: MEDIA, DESIGN, SYMBOLS

# 452

## WORKERS AND UNIONS

a symposium on

the challenges facing

labour organisations

symposium participants

- 12 THE PROBLEM**  
Posed by **Aditya Nigam**, Research Associate, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi
- 15 LIBERALISING LABOUR**  
**Danu Roy**, chemical engineer, advises communities on environmental issues, Delhi
- 20 A DIVIDED CITY**  
**Indrani Mazumdar** and **Subodh Varma**, activists in the trade union movement, Delhi
- 25 WAGES FOR UNORGANISED LABOUR**  
**Renana Jhabvala**, Coordinator and member, executive committee of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Secretary, National Centre for Labour, Delhi
- 29 ONTOLOGY OF WAGE LABOUR**  
**Rustam Singh**, Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla
- 31 MY STORY**  
**Sushila**, garment worker, Delhi
- 34 AN END AND A BEGINNING**  
**Mukul Sharma**, 'Navbharat Times', Delhi
- 38 DEMOCRATISATION AT AN IMPASSE**  
**Vishwas Satgar**, policy analyst and advisor to COSATU, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 41 A BUMPY ROAD AHEAD**  
**A. Thothathri Raman**, Special Correspondent, 'Business India', Delhi
- 45 ON WORKER TAKEOVERS**  
**Sharit K. Bhowmik**, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Bombay
- 51 COMMENT**  
**A.B. Bardhan**, General Secretary, Communist Party of India
- 53 BOOKS**  
Reviewed by **Prabhu Mahapatra**, **Harsh Sethi**, **Rakesh Kapoor**, **Parashuram Ray**, **Saugata Mukherji**, **N. Chandra Mohan**, **Kalpna Sharma**, **Saral Vidrohi** and **Aditya Nigam**
- 69 FURTHER READING**  
A select and relevant bibliography compiled by **Aditya Nigam**
- 71 CONTROVERSY**  
On conservation by **Himraj Dang** and **Bittu Sehgal**
- COVER**  
Designed by **Madhu Chowdhury** of **Dilip Chowdhury Associates**



# The problem

AS we move on to the end of an eventful century and a long millennium – what after all is time if not what happens in it – there are questions that we are called upon to face. If the previous century posed questions of human freedom in the context of work; asked how humanity could be free if a large majority were forced to work for others; demanded regulation of working hours and the right to work – the present century has witnessed at least their partial realization.

If the great revolutions of 1848 in Europe and the intellectual debates of the period raised these questions, it was the workers struggles of the late 19th and the 20th centuries that won the right to vote, an eight-hour working day, the formal acceptance of the right to work. To work for the realization of a classless society fired the imagination of millions of people all over the world. The revolutions of the working people from Russia, China and Vietnam, as well as the massive anti-colonial revolutions in the 'third world' were an outcome of that vision. The fact that this particular dream soured or turned into a nightmare says nothing about the 'purity' of the dreams and of the dreamers themselves.

We are confronted by the reversal of all those concerns. Today, the deity of the global market presides over the systematic dismantling of every one of the gains of the last two centuries. 'Get rich quick' is the new *mantra* – and it needs no great insight to see that this is applicable only to those who have at least something on which to build that 'richness'. For the large majority, especially in the third world, there is no other future but increasing poverty and destitution. The theology of the new global market has little to offer – not even the jobs that it could in the past, at least in times of boom. Today the world is talking of jobless growth and jobless recoveries.

Marx believed that the reckless and unhampered growth of the productive forces (read technology) must inevitably come into conflict with the relations of production, i.e. the social relations of class and property. This he saw as the beginning of the epoch of social revolutions. In our own times we are witnessing the resolution of this conflict in its very obverse. Technological growth and advance has been harnessed, for the present, primarily

in the service of capital and profit. Technological advance, Marx thought, could result in the reduction of the drudgery of work and in the very different conditions of an absence of private property, be used to reduce working hours for all. In our time, it is instead leading to the elimination of work – to growing unemployment.

As unemployment and insecurity increase and shifts the balance of power against workers, there are concerted attempts to do away with the legal safeguards that were built into the edifice of the welfare state. The post-war New Deal is in shambles.

'Deregulation of labour markets' is the new war-cry of capital. Workers' rights are invoked only when there is a conflict between different capitals in global trade wars and there again, the context of these invocations is the beleaguered economies of the ex-colonial world. The intention clearly is not to ensure the rights of labour but to undercut the competitive edge of some the trade-warriors, given the preponderance of low wages and absence of legal and organizational (i.e. unionization) safeguards.

This drastic shift in the balance of power in favour of capital and against the interests of labour, has made the situation extremely complex for workers' struggles for a dignified life and reasonable standards of living. More importantly, the conflict between the interests of the two classes is now taking place under very different conditions. It may be useful to recall that the early development of capitalism was facilitated by three very different sets of factors. First, there was what appeared to be the unlimited treasure of natural resources which it could colonise and use as its raw materials. Second, it was possible to uproot populations from their traditional occupations and land without significant organised resistance. Third, the possibility, in its early years, of the unlimited exploitation of labour, with no restrictions whatsoever on working hours and floor-wages.

On each of these counts, there are today severe barriers to the accumulation of capital. There is greater awareness and organised resistance to the process of displacement of old communities from their lands as also opposition to the reckless use (or misuse) of natural resources, which are no longer considered to be unlimited. Workers' struggles,

though on the retreat, have been an important feature for the last one century or more.

However, this not only places limits to accumulation, it also severely restricts, in fact, calls for a rethinking on a number of hitherto axiomatic assumptions of labour movements. Since capitalism transforms all productive relations into wage-relations, it follows that in its regime, only capital can employ labour. With pressure on the state to withdraw from the role of an entrepreneur (for good or bad), the only other 'legitimate' employer is vacating the scene. Global experience, including our own, shows that heightened labour militancy often leads to a flight of this highly mobile entity called capital, ironically leading to greater unemployment. There are therefore limits to the extent of labour militancy, given existing power relations. In a period of rampant and chronic unemployment, this creates an additional problem: labour and labour organizations must ensure, or at least facilitate, a proper 'investment climate', that is, rein in their militancy. This further strengthens the grip of capital.

How does the labour movement move out of this vicious circle? How does it rethink its strategies in ways in which this can be broken, which really means that it must start thinking of new forms of ownership that are viable. If there can be no return to the past, no possibility of restoring the old forms of community ownership, then there must be a serious attempt to look at ways in which new forms of communal/collective ownership can be evolved. This is a new challenge the beginnings of which can be seen in workers' cooperatives and workers' stock ownership plans with which some of the trade unions seem to be boldly experimenting.

Simultaneously, there is greater need for the labour movement in the country to re-define its position *vis-a-vis* other sections of the people reeling under the attack of globalization. So far, they have only figured as an embarrassment in the discourse of the labour movement – the artisans, the old communities we talked of earlier, the tribal and forest people and such others. The fact that the changes come against the background of a general ecological crisis heightens the desperation of capital for, as mentioned earlier, it presents one of the most formidable barriers to the accumulation of capital.

Environment is no enemy of labour as it often seems when we look at the immediate problems of job losses. Workers certainly need to struggle against job losses, particularly when industrialists make use of the environment bogey, as for instance in the relocation of polluting industries in Delhi, to divert capital from its current use to more lucrative sites. These are situations in which capital is destructive, both of labour and the environment, as an intrinsic part of the inexorable logic of accumulation. There is a need therefore to find ways in which labour and environment can sustain each other. We need to remind ourselves that the polluting industry maims and kills the worker first, before it kills the environment.

Any reconsideration of the working class movement at the turn of the century must be situated in the context of its integration into the global economy. True, there has always been a degree of integration with the world market but what is happening now is qualitatively different.

There are three major changes underway in recent years – changes that will only accelerate – that call for urgent attention by the workers' movement.

i) The sweeping impact of the revolution, especially in electronic, microchip and communications technology. This is a change that reduces human labour not merely to an adjunct of technology, it makes it incidental. The phenomenon of the much talked of jobless growth is a consequence of this circumstance. The communications revolution further accelerates the process by transforming the very notions and experience of time, compressing, as it were the world into one global city.

ii) The drastic transformation of the workplace – the 'organizational revolution', if one may use the term. The wide resort to post-Fordist organization, which transforms the workplace from the large factory employing thousands of workers to a highly mechanized/automated one that functions at the apex of a network of small subcontracting units, not only cuts costs of maintaining large inventories of raw stocks but equally importantly, does away with the need for permanently employed labour, as well as with regulations of the labour market. It reduces the workforce to a reserve that must maintain itself at its own cost.

iii) The heightened political-economic offensive of capital. In addition to the general offensive of capital against labour, the *political offensive* manifests itself in the dismantling of the post-war welfare state. The 'profit squeeze' in the last years of the golden age and the resultant crisis of accumulation has eventually led to the need to break the 'barriers to accumulation', deregulate labour markets and reorganize the very process of production. This increased aggression seems to have become possible with the heightened mobility acquired by capital.

The TU movement of the past and this is true of most shades, was predicated upon the dream of an imminent revolution. The idea that someday, maybe in the not-too-distant future, the working class would become master of its own destiny formed the underlying assumption of most TU strategies. The collapse of socialism has not only revealed the face of global capital, its hegemonizing and dominating project, it has also revealed to labour the lessons of its own experience as evidenced in the experience of the coal miners' struggle in the context of Thatcherite reforms in England.

This new reality forces us to contend with the complete transformation of the terrain of struggle. Consider the following circumstance: the militant working class struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s in West Bengal were undoubtedly legitimate struggles on legitimate demands, even though the forms sometimes went beyond the strictly legal bounds. One of the major long term consequences of those struggles, however, was that it led to major capital flight to other, more peaceful parts of the country. Worker militancy became one of the factors responsible for the deindustrialization of the state, leading to high degrees of unemployment. Three decades later, in entirely different circumstances, the working class movement has now to assure the industrialist of its 'reasonableness'. The Left Front government in the state has to 'assure' a peaceful industrial climate, a predicament faced by other regimes as well.

The scenario is in a different way, similar in the Northern countries. Capital seeks to move out of the high wage areas in their domestic economies to the third world, leading to further job losses. The entire debate in Europe around the so-called 'social clause', or on the NAFTA in the United States revealed precisely these fears of the workers organizations there. With heightened mobility of capital and its growing concentration into the sphere of finance, the situation becomes even more complex.

It is evident that for years together the Indian workers have been denied their fundamental right to a dignified existence. Labour laws have applied only to a miniscule section in the organized sector, and only where there were unions to enforce them. These workers apart, an overwhelming majority are still forced to live and work in dehumanizing conditions where none of the internationally accepted labour standards have any meaning. The urgency of implementing these standards is today greater than ever before,

considering that the ongoing reforms are likely to lead to a worsening of the living conditions of the majority. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the struggle for minimum wages in the highly vulnerable unorganised sector.

In an increasingly complex world, where even the World Bank and the advanced northern states are being forced to talk the language of workers' rights, the trade unions need to seriously rethink their notions of strategic intervention for the future. This all the more important because of a serious threat of the entire language of resistance and struggle being appropriated and grafted onto the discourse of globalization or, alternately being subsumed under the rhetoric of nationalism. This calls for a two-fold intervention: rethinking the slogans and forms of practical movement and, at the theoretical level, a radical contestation of meaning, of reworking concepts and categories.

Will the trade unions respond to the challenges they are presented with in the coming century? If the experience of their recent responses to the globalization process are any indication, there seems to be little effort to come to grips with the novelty and the magnitude of the problems. Mere reiteration of the faith; mere assertion of the determination to fight are no substitute for the effort to theoretically grasp the dimensions of change that have taken place and the limits they place, as well as the possibilities they open up, for future struggles.

One of the problems with the trade union movement in this country has arguably been its being an appendage of political parties across the spectrum. The trade union role, in such circumstances, becomes secondary to the political interests or the ideological constraints of the parties concerned. It is obvious, for instance, in the case of the left-wing unions that their opposition to the reforms has led them to a type of paralysis in responding to even the minimum possibilities of getting the best deal under the circumstances. So while the unions have continued to reiterate the position that they will have nothing to do with the exit policy, in the early years of the reform, the workers happily accepted 'golden handshakes' behind their backs. This was the tale of the public sector workers – even those who owed allegiance to the established trade unions. Just look at the Kanpur textile workers' experience.

On the other hand, had the TUs intervened positively, not only could they have ensured a better deal, they could also have got the workers to pool in their retirement money to start cooperative efforts. The response of the TUs to the proposals for workers share ownership fared no better. With some honourable exceptions, the opportunities were allowed to pass unused. The chasm between workers' interests and the political-ideological straitjackets of the parties is evident today as never before. The need clearly is for an autonomous workers' movement.

ADITYA NIGAM

# Liberalising labour

DUNU ROY

PICK up a magazine, any popular periodical of the times, and it reads like a primer on liberalisation – the kind used in primary schools to hone language skills.

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Everything is in large print. And for those who do not like to read too much in

\* I am indebted to Sanjeev Ghotge and Rajiv Lal for their pioneering work in this field, and to Imrana Qadeer for her incisive comments.

the age of instant information, there are alluring pictures to take you into never-never land. Except that the promised land of milk and honey is right here, waiting for the beckoning finger of a Santa Clausian finance minister.

It takes an effort to peer under the sub-text and make a very curious discovery. In this new Pepsi-Cola world, nobody works! Is it any wonder then, that workers' organisations across the nation are somewhat nervous about the golden future? A future without work?

Labour concerns about a future under liberalisation are many and varied. They have been eloquently put forward by the organised party affiliated unions, politicians of different hues, spokespersons of the unorganised sectors, and researchers and academics. Among the trends projected by labour leaders, the major one is of mechanisation and automation that all 'modernisation' entails. It is argued that such modernisation will not

only displace workers but also increase job intensity. Much of the work might be shifted out of the factory into the home, out of the purview of labour legislations. As global capital moves into India to take advantage of cheaper wages and lax environmental standards, it is also feared that 'dirtier' technologies will be transferred, making work even more dangerous. Evidence from existing trends from India and other developing countries are cited in support of these arguments.

**A**s the technological base of industry, agriculture and the service sector changes, it is inevitable that the accompanying organisational structures too will change. Casualisation, and sub-sub-contracting are likely to increase with a drastic decrease in permanent jobs. The growing number of temporary, casual, and contract labourers would also be compelled to move from time-rate to piece-rate work – in other words, to payment by the amount of production. As the shift from factory to the home takes place, there would obviously be deregulation and eventually, retrenchment of labour. The numbers in the unorganised sector would increase enormously.

The social impact of this transformation is also well predicted and anticipated. Women, arguably the least protected members of society, would be sucked into production – particularly home-based – leading to the 'feminisation' of labour. This is likely to be accompanied by increasing sexual exploitation. With the growth of automated production, workers would find themselves de-skilled; unemployment and underemployment would become more intensive and widespread. Poverty and the compulsion to find work will add to massive migration to the urban centres, causing new forms of misery, ill-health and social tensions. Privatisation of the economy will only discourage the formation of protective associations of labour and lead to an even more burdensome situation – the retreat of the state from many social sectors, including poverty alleviation, regulation and arbitration, provision of public services of distribu-

tion, health and education, their increasing cost.

The votaries, expectedly, counter all this. They point to a need for greater efficiency and productivity for competing in the international market, for modernisation and deregulation from the license-raj, for eroding the base of corruption in systems of governance. All these are key words which have become clearly defined in the language of liberalisation. In other words, whatever be the 'objective truth', there is already a clear conflict of interest between those for and against liberalisation, the poor and the rich, labour and capital. Every social event or crisis – from a train accident to a financial scam or a slump in the share market – becomes an occasion for both sides to put forward their arguments and advance their cause.

In this unequal battle it is obvious that the ideology of liberalisation has made major strides through public pronouncements, the media, and the creation of an essentially middle class attitude towards the ability of market forces to deliver. The forces of labour are struggling to find the wherewithal to face this incredibly powerful blitzkrieg. But before trying to understand how working class organisations could or should respond, it might be useful to recount how the social forces of 'modernisation' have been able to arrive at such a position of pre-eminence.

**V**ery briefly, the development of 'modern' industry begins with the advent of Taylorism. In 18th century Britain, where the industrial revolution began, Paul and Wyatt had already invented the spinning jenny – the technical basis for factory manufacture of textiles. It took almost a century before Arkwright incorporated it into a successful code of factory discipline – that is, how work could be organised on a shop-floor to produce as much as possible. But it was Taylor who first advanced the notions and concepts that would convert the ad hoc organisation of work into a 'science'.

F.W. Taylor, a workman, realised 'the absolute necessity for adequate management, the dictation to the worker

of the precise way in which work was performed.' He broke down each job into a series of elements and measured the time required to perform them. He thus established the 'standard time' for a job so that it could be used to fix the level of production and to eliminate 'useless' work. It might surprise many to learn that from 1880, for 26 years, Taylor conducted almost 50,000 experiments on 800,000 lbs of iron on 10 different machine tools to arrive at the best way to organise production.

**T**hus was born the first *research* tool to estimate 'all the work a worker can do without injury to his health, at a pace that can be sustained through a working lifetime.' The genesis of this research lay in the observations and analysis of a man who had himself been a worker and provided the weapon whereby managers took control over the work-process.

Taylor's time-and-motion study principles provided the springboard for the *assembly line* technique. This rested on the integration of three principles: the standardisation of parts, interchangeability, and the movement of materials. In 1903, when the technique was first introduced by Ford for the production of fly-wheel magnets, there was a dramatic reduction in production time from 20 minutes to 5 minutes.

The workforce was drawn mainly from those who had already developed their skills in the production of bicycles or carriages. They were thus highly skilled workmen who moved around the car in order to assemble it. But by 1908 research showed that it would be more productive to move only on one side of the car. Five more years of experimentation and by 1913 it was the car that was moving and the assembly line was born: 'an ultra modern conveyor belt... really a mechanical hand with literally hundreds of fingers each carrying out appropriate parts at appropriate context and appropriate places.' Noteworthy is the fact that many of the initial problems of planning for the supply of materials, actual operations, the pace of work and so on, were solved with suggestions from the workers themselves.



By 1925, Ford in a single day was producing the number of cars it earlier produced in a year. Thus, in the end, not only had work intensity increased, but the skilled workman too had been eliminated.

An increasing alienation of the workforce from work and the boredom of a repetitive job on the assembly line led to increasing absenteeism, worker turnover, shop-floor disputes and tardiness. A new technique had to be found to combat these problems. A series of experiments at Hawthorne led researchers to an insight that 'recognition affected job performance positively'.

**T**hus evolved the human relations school of management. It recognised that management-worker relations are conflict ridden. Instead of disguising this conflict, it was explicitly posed and ways found to resolve it – at least temporarily. Some of the ways were through improving the work environment, job-enrichment or autonomous work groups.

One of the better designed and documented experiments was conducted at the Volvo plant in Kalmar, where an entirely new factory was built around the concept through discussions between industrial engineers, supervisors and union representatives. Another spin-off of the human relations approach was to link workers directly to the market. An increase in wages was possible only with a similar increase in profits. So if workers decided on a certain increase in pay, the accounts department calculated the required reduction in production costs. This was then distributed across work teams who reduced costs by either greater work intensity or through technical economics.

However, the very nature of machine based production defeated many of the premises of the human relations school. As one worker described his experience on a metal-cutting machine: 'A man has to be handcuffed with heavy leather straps and a steel cable runs from the straps up his arms and under his armpits, coming out over his shoulders from behind. The breaking point of the machine is ten thousandth of a second. It works

with electric eyes. The worker puts the metal to be cut in the machine. The buttons need to be touched – the machine comes down and cuts... so fast, it isn't humanly possible for the worker to get his hands out of the way before it cuts. They put those cuffs around the workers' wrists so that his hands are automatically jerked out of the way to prevent them from being cut off. There was such a commotion about this machine that they couldn't get anybody to start it off...'

The obvious answer found by researchers to these and related problems was *automation*. It was vastly accelerated by the development of information technology coming out of laboratories and institutes, many of them sponsored by industry or government grants. Automation essentially removed the worker from the production process on the plea that the worker was prone to injury from faster-moving and high energy machines. But it also enabled replacement of skilled workers, consequently eliminating problems that the human relations school had attempted to address.

**T**he invention of the semi-conductor and the micro-chip facilitated this removal because production information could now be stored in machines. Curiously enough, this also led to the possibilities of decentralisation of production with lower machinery costs and faster communications, and this form of decentralisation could easily cross international borders – superbly illustrated by the semi-conductor industry itself.

The production of semi-conductors consists of four processes: research and development; wafer fabrication; assembly of transistors; final testing of product. Of these, the latter two are, or were, low skill processes. Recently, wafer production too has become low-skilled because of automation. Hence these three processes can be separated and spatially distributed. This allows capital to move rapidly in order to locate production at the most favourable sites, that is, where labour is unprotected and unorganised and wages are low. It also permits the nodal company to control the entire indus-

try by retaining the key research and marketing functions.

As international competition in the market for information technology increased multinational corporations – particularly from the USA – deliberately chose South East Asia for the movement of capital. The decision was based on the need for political stability, open financial systems, excellent transport and communications, a flourishing industrial base, a workforce used to working for low wages and a small but crucial supply of trained personnel.

**A** set of wholly-owned subsidiaries was set up. These did not generate any additional employment in the SE Asian nations and there were few favourable implications for the unorganised workforce – particularly women, with the new factories in the export processing zones fully exploiting the traditional gender bias to recruit young, low paid and unskilled female workers. Thus *decentralisation* on a global scale itself became an instrument to control labour and cut down costs. The encouragement to set up dependent, ancillary units was also part and parcel of these techniques of decentralisation.

The processes of globalisation have given rise to a new set of problems with regard to cutting costs and increasing productivity. Management research has responded with a range of measures which are implicit in the new credo of *liberalisation*. Productivity 'deals' with the existing labour force and 'voluntary' retirement schemes for redundant workers are part of this language of 'freedom'. Efficiency is sought to be heightened by increasing mechanisation and the accompanying organisational techniques of total control, or the drop/rotating shift.

Extensive research has gone into the setting up and management of flexible and small batch production with small inventories. Training costs have been minimised by on-the-job apprenticeship periods. In a brilliant twist, the threat of international competition (or 'sickness') has itself been used to revive companies by appealing to worker loyalty, emphasising the unions' co-responsibility to

keep the company alive, in the process eliminating supervisory and middle-grade staff.

Modern Indian industry and its comrades-in-arms in policy making and governance are inheritors of this worldwide legacy of scientific management – and they are very much aware of it. Through a chain of research centres, schools of management, international conferences and journals, they have developed an extensive network of information collection and dissemination. Thus, novel experiments conducted in different production units by different companies in different nations are documented and the information shared worldwide.

Transfers of technology may be seen by the managers and policy makers with some suspicion because of the pressures of market competition, but there is no fear of theorising management experience. The more sophisticated the management tool, the easier it is to control labour. In addition, there is no end to a search for greater sophistication and newer techniques because the owners of capital know, better than any radical political scientist, that they have to constantly strive for supremacy in society.

**T**hus, research is encouraged not only into management strategies but also into marketing and media, communications and information technology, sociology, psychology and anthropology—all geared to better understand and control human beings' mind and bodies.

What is labour's response to such an all-encompassing strategy of capital? It can be summed up in the declaration that they will 'fight the new economic policy of globalisation and take-overs by multinational corporations.' This is sometimes made more specific in terms of 'fighting' for the regularisation of the casual workforce, or for legislation for construction workers or even (as key words get picked up) for the protection of the environment.

Sometimes one also hears the cautionary note that labour organisations have become accustomed to tackling the particular rather than the general, that they

are concerned more with the micro than with the macro-world, and that there is little time for immediate response to events, leave alone analysis of past failures and future trends.

Now, as any foot soldier knows, the mere declaration of a readiness to fight has nothing to do with winning the war. There has to be a plan, a strategy, fall-back options, knowledge of the terrain, flexibility in inventing tactics and a constant feedback of information. This is precisely what owners of capital are doing, all the while sharpening their wits and their weapons.

**I**n this context, the labour leaders' valiant efforts are, as the poet so aptly said, 'full of sound and fury signifying nothing.' Worse, in the courageous determination to 'struggle', there is an undercurrent of restoring the past, of a 'return to the left-of-centre politics', of the resurgence of the state as a protector of the poor. It is this rare combination of empty stomachs, clenched fists and numbed minds that sends capital laughing all the way to the bank.

What could labour do to strategise its response? To bring to its struggle for a better world, a sense of inspired thought and luminous vision so that what Gandhi called the 'last person' may not only wipe away her tears but glory in the joy of living? The answer, logically, has to come from the ranks of labour itself. Equally, it is an answer that will require meticulous research and painstaking experimentation to yield methodical analysis.

It will require centres where working men and women can think as much as they can labour. Even the forms of research and the kinds of centres where such answers are sought will perhaps need to be totally different from what capital has done. This itself is an idea of considerable (and exciting) speculation which may range from studying experiences from the Paris Commune to the Cyberstride... of Chile, the Rubdnik of Poland to the textile workers' strike of Mumbai. At least concerned labour researchers can begin by pointing out that perhaps much of the data already exists;

perhaps what is needed is a different way of looking – and even this may be already implicit in the experiential base of the working class (or the collection of sub-classes that may eventually call itself labour).

Take, for instance, the issue of job-intensity and its rate of increase. In a Ford factory, a worker was supposed to tighten the bolts if two of them were marked as loose by the supervisor. In case three were so marked, the worker was supposed to let the assembly go by. In the beginning all went well, but soon the managers noticed a sharp increase in the number of untightened bolts. An enquiry revealed that as the speed of the line increased, the worker found it impossible to tighten even two bolts in the given time. So he intelligently acquired a piece of chalk, marked a third one as loose and let the whole thing pass.

This is in the best tradition of what may be called a subversive notion of workers' resistance. It becomes part of a strategy when applied in a more general way. It was almost so when the workers of a shoe factory produced more shoes than they were required to under the norm – but all the shoes were only for the left foot. Gandhi must have had a quiet chuckle when his call for a day of penance and fasting inevitably became a general strike.

**E**very issue can be looked at differently. Casualisation of work is greatly feared by labour unions. The standard response of unionists is to agitate for regularisation. However, as the experience of Jamshedpur and Shahdol has shown, the power of casual labour to halt work is sometimes even more than that of permanent employee. Because s/he performs a range of tasks that are crucial to production, from supplying raw materials to maintenance, to loading finished products—if s/he abstains from work, production comes to a grinding halt and the management cannot declare a lock-out and cut down overheads.

So there is a case for viewing casualisation not as a weakness but building on its strengths. Historically, in the

early days of industrialisation, many of the powerful labour movements which won what today look like self-evident labour rights were fought by precisely such casual, unorganised and insecure workers.

A similar case exists for feminisation. It is generally seen as a weakening of the fabric of (male) worker organisations. It could also be regarded – in the context of several forceful agitations by fisherwomen and beedi workers in the south, or, on a slightly divergent track, by women in the Chipko or anti-price-rise or anti-liquor movements – as the womb of an enormously creative women's militancy. Provided, of course, that the sadly neglected studies of the political economy of women's labour, particularly in household work, becomes an important area of concern for unions. Migration too, leads to a harsh uprooting. But at the same time, as studies of coal miners of Bihar and brick workers of Gujarat indicate, it exposes the migrant to a wider world, to new ideas, and to a breaking of old bondages within the family.

**U**nemployment and job insecurity are traumatic experiences. But they simultaneously provide a basis for shifting focus from the individual (and often, coercive) employer to dealing with a social and politically vulnerable state. This basis could be further enlarged by not merely accepting what the state provides, such as cheap rice, but by demanding specific, productive and sustained work and a responsible, accountable administration.

Such efforts are implicit in a demand for the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra and the right to information campaign in Rajasthan. The Agriculture Minister's recent proposal to sell government holdings in blue-chip companies rather than disinvesting in public sector enterprises should also be seen as a facet of the pressure on a weak government to be accountable and responsible.

The Minister's proposal reportedly 'ruffled' quite a few feathers in company boardrooms. Perhaps it indicates a

remarkable sense and cogency of the proposition itself. Maybe mere ruffling of such nature is in order within a wider labour strategy, which is what makes the single-minded demand for turning over 'sick' units to labour-managed cooperatives a somewhat bewildering one.

**U**nits generally become sick because profits have been drained away to other enterprises. Why should workers claim full responsibility for them when they can be revived only at the cost of their own self-exploitation and at the mercy of the lending institutions? Workers should also demand the takeover of healthy, profit-making factories and plantations (such as Eicher and ITC) on grounds of participation and efficiency. This could also provide the capital base for reviving drained enterprises.

The same argument could be applied to retrenchment. Why only struggle to save jobs in a plant that is restructuring with jobs that are likely to be more demanding? Why not try and force a revision of the rates of compensation, advancing the logic of the recent Supreme Court decision on the relocation of industry in Delhi.

These can easily be computed through the kind of economic reasoning that capital already recognises. This has already been attempted in the case of displacement, leading to newer provisions in the Narmada Tribunal Award and the Environment Protection Act. So much so that in the case of the Auranga dam, the project had to be abandoned because it was demonstrated that the cost of compensation and rehabilitation actually exceeded the capital cost of the dam.

And if this approach is linked to the issues of deskilling and the regulation of the small scale sector, then creative labour associations could set in motion a new world of skill education and alternative economics somewhat on the lines of what the Shop Stewards Combine of Lucas Aerospace tried in retooling to produce turbo-engines for public transport buses instead of jet engines for military planes.

In some curious way the vision of an alternative economics in consonance

with alternative production processes is related to issues of environment and home-based work. Essentially because both could be reinterpreted to give a different meaning to a labour agenda. Environmental questions bring out of the closet the so far unrecognised 'externalities' of production costs: questions such as how much energy is required, in what form, to transform how much raw material, into what kind of product, for whose use, leaving behind what kinds of waste? These are crucial for determining the nature of work itself. They can be used to give a different slant to the question of who does what for whom. In other words, is production for collective use or for profit-making exchange?

**H**ome-based work, in turn, calls for a need to understand the nature of unpaid activity in the entire expanse of 'struggle', because it sets out in clear terms the relationship between the workplace and residential area. In other words, it could be seen as the fulcrum around which a different community could form – such as the cooperative of striking workers of Hindustan Lever who, along with their families, produced Lock-Out soap. It could also connect with the quirkiness with which the women and men of the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh swept their lane and dumped the garbage in a huge smell heap at the steps of the offices of an apathetic and unresponsive town administration.

Such actions carry out a time-and-motion study of management and capital and then demand that they too obey productivity norms. It could also, hopefully, provide a leverage for labour to challenge gender inequalities and the undervaluation of home-based activity.

Middle class activists and researchers could probably contribute similar insights that they have acquired in the long course of workers' struggles all over the world. But to collect these insights, delve deep into the collective memory of the workers, and prepare the base for a theory of social transformation, is really a task for the labour organisations to initiate. Labour has to help itself to learn which

requires a sense of confidence, an assertion of the self. This could be a part of the aesthetics of a labour movement.

I have often wondered why so much of the art, sculpture, and theatre on labour casts it in a heroic mould, ravaged with pain and gaunt with misery. So many of the working men and women I know have such beautiful bodies, tempered by the sweat of work, and such marvellous minds, forged by the complexities of survival.

Why doesn't this come through in visual portrayals? Is it because that too comes through the eyes of the observers who see them as surrogate subjects? There is such a different vision in the railway workers who created a sculpture out of the scrap at Jamalpur, in the women farm workers of Mithila, who sing of Sita's motherland. Will it require a 'Black is Beautiful' whirlwind to transform the 'dignity' of labour into the magic of creation?

Marx wrote of the revolutionary capture of power. Political organisations influenced by his words sought to capture the state, to take over the reigns of governance. Perhaps, this too needs to be looked at differently. Is power only concerned with ruling the lives of the governed? Or, could it be seen as holding to account those who manage, who govern as 'servants' and not as 'officers'? If it is to be a *people's republic* then why should the people only remain the *public*? If they can set up bodies and individuals to perform stipulated tasks for the common good and yet call to task those bodies (including what we now call governments), then would that not be an unusual way of perceiving the 'withering away of the state'?

The meek and the humble, we are told, will inherit the earth, not just take their seats in parliament and union offices. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is as if the notion of workers' paradise is forever lost. But that is patently absurd. Paradise is a creation of the mind. If labour can create so much wealth, it can also create knowledge. The challenge before us lies in the search of a new practice, new theory, new ways of seeing and doing.

Workers and Unions

## A divided city

INDRANI MAZUMDAR and  
SUBODH VARMA

FIFTY years after independence, the city of Delhi presents a strange sight: 3500 years of history immortalised in the ruins of forts and monuments, gardens and roads – fragments of the seven cities that have fallen here. Conceived as a colonial capital, sheltered from the multitude, there is a palpable presence of government, housed in spacious pillared buildings amid wide boulevards with multinational flags, trees and gardens. And surrounding all this lies the vast hinterland of dwellings and workplaces of the mass of the city – a population whose expansion has made Delhi one of the fastest growing cities in the world.

Drawn to the capital by its offer of infinite advantages of economic, social, educational, administrative and political nature, people have come from various parts of the country. Mingling with the original population through labour, they constitute an ever widening base of the city. Synthesising out of the myriad processes of individual and collective lives, inter-relationships and conflicts, and from the division between those who labour and those who enjoy its fruit, this gigantic city has today become a microcosm of the entire nation, reflecting the social contradictions that lie at the heart of Indian society. It is a city divided against itself.

More than half the population of this city leads a life of harsh, debilitating misery, struggling to survive and often carrying the load of the survival of dependents in distant villages. Their number, 32 lakhs living in officially defined slums, 14 lakhs in *jhuggi jhonpuri* clusters (not defined as slums), 14 lakhs in resettlement

colonies – totals 60 lakhs. These are the people who provide labour and skills in innumerable ways – selling their bodies and minds in the service of the propertied other half. Through deliberate policies, they are forced to live in sub-human conditions, deprived of all basic amenities. The *bastis* in which they crowd together are the breeding grounds of epidemics – ravaging diseases spreading their germs in the ‘pestilential air and poisoned water’ of their quarters. They live in fear of fires, floods, crime and overtory. They work in conditions of unbelievable strain.

Even as their children play in the 19th century industrial wastes, even as they watch the lifestyles and values propagated by the satellite-linked television in the dingy squalor of their homes, they remain at the mercy of the elements. They form the base of the pyramid that is Delhi – humiliated and exploited in life and sung in death, mere statistics. Who are these people? What is their history? How do they work and survive? What is their relationship with the affluence of Delhi? What is their social culture, their politics? And what has been the approach of the rulers of Delhi towards them? The answers to these uninvestigated questions constitute the real story of Delhi.

**A**t the core of this section is the industrial working class, employed in small to medium sized industries located in 20 industrial areas and 37 ‘non-conforming’ industrial areas, as well as thousands of units scattered across residential areas. While official statistics places their number at 8.02 lakhs, the actual figure is likely to be more than twice that, largely unorganised. A harsh life of oppression, exploitation and humiliation is what shapes the character of the industrial worker. The need to live compels them to work over and over, well over the 8-hour working day, leaving their homes early in the morning and returning late at night. Their lives are controlled by the whims of profit and its appropriators. Big or small, their bodies and spirit are daily eroded by the domination exercised over them; their needs compel them to accept from their masters

that which is otherwise unacceptable, man to man.

The manner in which industrial development has taken place in the city – undertaken by a capitalist class corrupted and lumpenised by its symbiotic relationship with an already corrupted political centre – has moulded the relationship between its workers and their employers. Bourgeois legality is constantly violated by the bourgeois himself. Labour laws which grew out of the imperative to contain the conflict between labour and capital to manageable proportions, are brazenly flouted. Organic links exist between criminals, the *maliks* and the *netas*.

**T**he vast majority of industrial workers in Delhi get only 50-70% of the minimum wage, presently at Rs 1677 a month for the unskilled worker. As a policy, workers are not shown on record in factories, thereby depriving them of job security, medical cover, vacations/leave, bonus and the like. They lead a life on the brink. The present misplaced policy to relocate industry, ostensibly to curb pollution, has only magnified their endemic insecurity.

To deprive workers of legal benefits and thereby maximise profits is the widespread practice of contract work or casualisation. Instead of formal employment, there is a *thekedar*, under whose aegis workers continue to work within factory premises – perennially depressing wages and making unionisation difficult. Several industries – particularly garments, and even electronics and engineering, have undertaken to farm out work, thus atomising production and leading it away from the factory into the homes of the workers. In every working class area, women, children and old people can be seen bent over, straining their eyes, corroding their fingers, performing small work – even fine work – for a pittance of a piece-rate. For sheer survival, thousands of families accept this sweat labour at Rs 10 or 20 a day. For them there is no protective legislation: they are invisible, unrecognised and exploited at will.

The home-based workers, adjuncts to the industrial workers, are the tip of the iceberg of that vast army of sellers of labour that constitutes the so-called informal sector – an inevitable feature of the metropolis. It is estimated that in Delhi there are over 100,000 people who carry loads – the most primitive manual labour. They load and unload vegetables and fruit at *subzi mandis*, grain at *anaj mandis*, diverse goods at railway sidings, industrial areas, commercial centres, or just carry loads from one point to another. A similar figure is estimated for rickshaw pullers, who ferry both humans and goods. There are thousands of labourers involved in the never-ending construction activity in the capital. Although a majority are tied to a chain of contractors and subcontractors, loosely floating construction workers can also be found huddled in large numbers in the morning, at various labour markets – their labour daily up for sale. There are lakhs of people who provide specific services to maintain the lifestyles of the middle and upper classes – domestic servants (largely women), washermen and *presswallahs*, sweepers, watchmen, whitewashers and so on.

**S**lightly higher on the social scale are the lakhs of employees in shops, offices, restaurants, *dhabas*, cinema halls, car repair shops, petrol pumps and other establishments. They too, often earn less than the prescribed minimum wage but have better conditions of work and less back-breaking labour. Several tens of thousands are involved in the profession of motorised transportation like driving autorickshaws, taxis, buses and goods vehicles. There are associated vocations like those of mechanics, cleaners, helpers and conductors, associated with ‘ustads’. In 1993, there were 71,568 autorickshaws, 11,679 taxis, 23,943 buses and 1,14,294 goods vehicles.

Apart from the labouring classes, there is an equally vast section involved in petty-trade – themselves loading, unloading and even producing the goods they sell. In the last two decades there has been a noticeable increase in the number and size of weekly markets –



named after the day of the week they are held on, e.g. *Sombazar*, *Budhbazar* etc. Often this is a way of augmenting income in the face of growing poverty, but several people make a living by rotating the bazars. Unemployed or dismissed workers gravitate to this occupation. They buy goods from wholesale markets and sell them in residential areas at rates cheaper than those established shops. Those who solely do this work, the itinerant vendors, roam through residential colonies, selling vegetables, foodstuffs and diverse products and services.

There are those who set up pavement shops or even permanent (not *pucca*) shops in working class colonies and near industrial and commercial centres. All these *rehri*, *patri wallahs* and *khomcha wallahs* survive by giving weekly bribes to local policemen and corporation officials. Despite this they live in perpetual fear of the 'committee' (corporation squads) who periodically swoop down on them, confiscating their meagre goods.

**E**mbodied in this commercial and industrial economy exist caste groups who still pursue the profession allocated to them by the *varna vyavastha*. There are nearly 60,000 handloom weavers living in slums. Pauperised by the textile policy and unable to compete with the large manufacturers, their *khaddis* (looms) have been rotting for over a decade now. Adults have turned to petty shopkeeping or factory-employment or even crime to survive. Similarly, there are leather workers, pig breeders, potters and the like – traditional artisans who migrated to the city years ago, whose life and work has been rendered irrelevant, making survival a desperate battle. Sweepers, scavengers and sanitation workers – the lowest in the caste hierarchy are perhaps the only ones who survive as a group because their work and position is co-opted into the present system.

On the very fringes of this hinterland of the informal economy are thousands who subsist by scavenging, collection and sorting of wastes like polythene bags, paper, glass and metals. There are the beggars, mendicants, petty

thieves, swindlers, pick-pockets, drug pedlars and the like. This twilight zone, marked by a brutalised and dehumanised spirit, is but a short step from disease wracked destitution, mental derangement and death on the one hand, and inexorable gravitation to the underworld of organised crime on the other.

**T**oday's city is no longer the old walled city or Lutyen's colonial capital. The change begins with the partition of the country when a massive influx of refugees, primarily from Punjab, arrive. Of the total population of Delhi in 1951, refugees comprised 28.4%, of which 1,90,000 were accommodated in houses vacated by the Muslims. 1,199,250 others were accommodated in houses constructed all round the city covering 2,958.6 acres. It was the commercial enterprise of the Punjab refugees that laid the economic foundations of the city. Over the years, Delhi has emerged as a major commercial and distribution centre for north India and the nucleus for as many as 27 wholesale trades. Of the 24,600 wholesale trading establishments, many have histories going back to the last century. But the more significant ones like textiles, automobile parts and machinery have grown out of the newly constructed populace following the Partition, dominated largely by the Punjab refugees. Out of this commerce, combined with the gravitation of capital towards Delhi, particularly after the centralisation of political and administrative power by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, a new phase of industrial expansion occurred, attracting workers from all over the country.

Compared to the all-India decennial rate of population growth (23.85%), Delhi has witnessed a phenomenal growth rate of over 50% for the past several decades. Within this there was a sharp increase of migrants in the 1970s, as evidenced by the fact that whereas in the decade 1961-71, 37.31% of Delhi's population increase was due to migration, in the following decade (1971-81) this figure increased to 57.03%. Today, if only in numbers, the migrant workers dominate the city as never before.

People from all over, but especially the Hindi-speaking belt, have streamed into the city. In far-flung villages and *mofussil* towns, the capital represents the doorway to economic survival and social advance. Usually it is the poorer peasant and landless labourer who is forced by immiseration to seek the option of migration to the city. A large proportion of the belong to the Backward and Scheduled castes. Prospects of professional advancement or opportunities attract members of the middle sections of the peasantry and other middle classes too. Generally, whichever stratum of society, it is the young who make the great journey, and today 67% of Delhi's population is below 30 years of age. It is these migrants that make up vast sections of the poor and exploited in Delhi.

**W**hile there are compelling socio-economic reasons that force this migration, the actual transition is not easy. The most prevalent conduit is that of connections: a person already in the city who can be followed by others from his family, his village or community – sometimes through invitation and sometimes through the subjective hope for initial help. A significant section of the youth who make this journey do so to break away from the stranglehold of feudal family authority. Some measure of ambition, courage and striving is the precondition for making this crucial move.

It is estimated that 42% of the migrants come from U.P., 20% from Bihar, 8% from Haryana, 7% from Punjab, 5% from Rajasthan, 4% from Kerala, 3% from Maharashtra and 3% from Tamil Nadu. Of the others, the largest contingent is Bengali. In the last 15 years, there seems to have been an increased proportion of those coming from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

It is they who inhabit the slums, jhuggi jhonpris, the resettlement colonies and the innumerable unauthorised colonies that have sprung up on the outskirts of the city. According to the DDA, 50% of the people are without proper houses, 70% without sewer lines and 60% without regular kitchens. Behind these statis-

the daily lives of the people living in cesspools of infection – with contaminated drinking water, excreta and garbage lying exposed in the vicinity, their food unprotected from flies, their surroundings breeding-grounds for malaria and waterborne infectious diseases. Epidemics borne here spread to more pristine neighbourhoods, much to the outrage of the elite.

It was estimated that in 1995 there were 180 jhuggi clusters with a total population of 20 lakhs. Largely bereft of adequate public latrines and other civic amenities, these jhuggis are at least a place to stay. This need for a place was cynically used by the Congress party to bolster its declining support in the aftermath of the Emergency, and realised through pradhans who combine muscle power with political clout to settle the jhuggis. Enrolment of settlers as voters was the jhuggi dwellers' first toe-hold in the city. This was for protection, not to mention familiarity with the Congress party. Regardless of their place of origin, the settlers followed and depended on the Congress pradhans. This form of centralisation of politics fulfilled both the need for a supply of cheap labour and also created a dependence of these migrants on the Congress pradhans. This relationship shaped their politics for several years till discontent combined with disillusionment with the callousness of Congress opened the way for embracing V.P. Singh's social justice plank. It was during his short tenure, when tokens were issued to them after a survey, that they felt recognised as citizens. However, the absolute disengagement of the Janata from the moneyed, propertied and administrative classes of Delhi after the Lal Commission, soon aggravated its weakness and loosened fledgeling ties with the jhuggi dwellers. With the collapse of the JD, the BJP and the Congress made inroads among these sections. Where the 1970s saw the birth of resettlement colonies in Delhi, the 15 years have seen the development of sprawling unauthorised colonies on its rural outskirts. This new process

began with the Emergency in 1975. Under the 19 months of authoritarian rule, bulldozers razed thousands of jhuggis to the ground and brought down the number of squatters from 1.42 lakhs (1973) to only 20,000 (1976). People were relocated in plots of 25 sq metres in resettlement colonies at that time just barren pieces of land far away from places of work.

With the passage of time, the fact of ownership of land became a privilege of sorts. However, this exercise could not wipe out the jhuggi clusters which continued to spring up. According to DDA estimates, 50% of the allottees have sold off their allotted land. Some of them have gone back to jhuggi dwellings; many have been forced to sell their houses or plots in the face of debt, unemployment or crisis situations. Sections have been pushed further towards the unauthorised colonies built by avaricious property dealers.

Lured by the feeling that property provides security and stability, and the fact that initially the price of land was substantially cheaper in these colonies than in the resettlement colonies, illiterate and semi-literate working people begged and borrowed to buy land and build homes. Homes that often leak due to low-cost construction, sans municipal water and sewerage, are largely without electricity and other basic amenities, rough, stony and dust-laden tracks that wear out footwear and cycles. And yet, they cling to scraps of paper – generally forgeries – which make them owners of property. Inexorable economic forces – real wage depression, closures, retrenchments and unemployment – force them to traverse the length and breadth of the city for constantly changing avenues to sell their labour power. And yet, insecurity for their families, degrading conditions of life in unprotected settlements, as also the perception of enhanced opportunities due to rising real estate prices and the urge for land ownership inherited from their peasant origins – all drive them towards acquisition of residential property.

Often this search unleashes a chain of events compromising their lives. They mortgage themselves to employers by

taking advances, resign from relatively secure jobs to acquire lumpsum settlement of accounts and become burdened with interest payment on loans. Their daily lives become more strenuous as distances and ill-health increase. All this for the search for an illusory security and permanence in private ownership of property.

From the jhuggis, through resettlement land up to the unauthorised colonies, the working masses of Delhi have been used as cannon-fodder for political and electoral mobilisation by the dominant parties. Initially dependent on political patronage for their survival, their aspirations are pulverised by the capitalist economic, social, civic and political order of the city. In addition, their political voice has been undemocratically confined: the constituencies where working classes are concentrated (east and outer Delhi) make up 54% of the population of the city but elect only two MPs, whereas the remaining 46% are represented by 5 MPs.

Within this overarching economic order lies a world of customs, communities, ideologies, religion, inner conflicts – a teeming culture of village heritage and peasant backgrounds, in partial synthesis with the common laws of survival in the metropolis. From within the womb of this synthesis old and new aspirations rub shoulders with each other. Conflicts erupt, frustrations drive men and women towards new and unheard of practices. Bonded to the village by deep-rooted emotional, cultural and social bonds, groups of migrant workers often stay together, work for 16 hours a day, eat collectively and save to take back to the village. As time passes, the city creeps under the skin. The possibility of a wider link arises and with a job of relative security, aspirations of owning a small house after a tenure of service, a significant proportion of the loose fringe develops roots in the city. A change occurs with the perception of freedom from rural drudgery and abuse. A permanent job in one of the bigger industrial units may ultimately lead to acceptance of the city as their home. Observe the resistance of

textile workers to relocation. They own houses, their children have been born and brought up here. They have to spend a lifetime serving the city and they have no affinity to agricultural work.

Yet, ancient caste differences and prejudices remain despite the levelling process of the formation of the community of workers. They remain propped up by the ritual of endogamous marriage and social attitudes to women, as also the reality of group migration and group, often caste-based, settlements in the city. People cling to caste and community identities in the face of social insecurity and humiliation.

**T**he city, increasingly has a pernicious influence on the mind and spirit of the worker. In consciousness, wedded to thoughts and emotions arising from pre-capitalist origins, the relentless pace and range of the city, the subjugation of the body and mind to the new god of profit, initially shocks the laid-back, somnolent consciousness of the villager. However, as men and women start interacting with the city, find work, develop friendships, acquire a certain independence from their origins, a world of freedom is also revealed. Freedom that is a double-edged weapon: cutting away at ignorance and deadening unchangeability of 'rural idiosyncrasy' while simultaneously eroding the feelings of collective spirit, of respect for humans, of humanity itself. Thus the Brahmin worker from Bihar who no longer wears the sacred thread in Delhi and no longer believes in the essentiality of ritual, but puts on the thread as he reaches the Patna railway station and takes a dip in the Ganga before going home.

The metropolis also constantly humiliates the labourer. Symbols of affluence and power are around, even as the labourer's existence is eked out in squalor, filth and pain. Humiliated for being a labourer, for caste background, for region, for language, for ignorance, for diffidence, for illiteracy, for colour and texture of the skin, for features, for habits and consciousness. In short, for his or her very being. Humiliation, is perpetuated by

civic policy—provision of less water, less electricity, sub-standard schools, deficient health-care, inadequate filthy public latrines, no sewerage and so on. Humiliation by the factory owner, the client, the users of the labourer's service. From the middle class Delhi-ite spews forth a litany of anger and revulsion against the filth brought in by the servants and labourers. Humiliation that has led to inhuman extremity in incidents like a jhuggi dweller being beaten to death for defecating in a park. Humiliation combined with fear generated by the use of a dehumanised and brutalised police force.

Freed in a sense from a blind acceptance of the rural karma variety, there is deep anger and resentment in these oppressed sections. It may find expression in militant strikes by industrial workers where the strength and security of numbers allows the liberty of this expression. It may also contribute to looting and pilage in riots like of 1984, channelised for political ends in communal directions.

Out of all this emerges the search for a collective identity, a security in numbers, bonded by a perceived commonness. It is met by attempts to replicate the village in slums and to form associations based on caste, region, language or profession. And all this takes place alongside new aspirations, vulgarised and fantastically prettified by an electronic media, which has penetrated into almost every area—the gift of the present policy of liberalisation. This has thrown up new forms of social tensions, often, the result of, the crudest, retrogressive and violent aspirations. The spread of dowry even to those caste groups which have no history of it, is a case in point.

**I**t is the absence of a strong trade union movement and the weakness of a pro-working class political movement on which is predicated the scale of regressive social, ideological and political trends in the working classes of Delhi. Working class power erupts from time to time in industrial strikes, in mass struggles against the police and the administration, but quickly recedes, stifled by the small-

ness of their proportion to the city.

Standing out against in this background of weakness was the 7-day strike of industrial workers in 1988, historic in that it mobilised the workers on an unprecedented scale, successful in that it led a rise in minimum wages from Rs 562 per month to Rs 750 per month. For the first time a variable dearness allowance was granted as a result of the strike. However its political impact was shortlived as remained organisationally unconsolidated, both in the industrial areas as well as in linking with the rest of the lives of workers in their places of residence.

**T**oday, although there are more than 1568 trade unions registered in Delhi, the overwhelming bulk are instruments of the avarice of individual '10% wallahs', who have specialised in profiteering through account settlements of the workers, thus disarming their collective struggle and emboldening exploitation by the capitalist class. Still it can be said that the 7-day strike has shown that the industrial working class, if moved into sweepstakes, displays both power and magnetic attraction for other oppressed sections. Witness the significant participation of non-industrial workers including women in the strike demonstrations, hinting at possibilities of wider and far-reaching political action by the working class.

As disparities increase, as the glitter of the world of the rich gets more visible, as unemployment and impoverishment grow simultaneously, a fertile soil is being prepared for revivalist communal ideologies. And yet, the people of Delhi display a marked and unusual mental practicality born out of necessity and their own perceptions of this ongoing process. A practicality that largely serves the interests of the dominant powers of Delhi, of the maintenance of the status quo. It requires a well-organised force to release them from narrow life cubicles and bring for generic collective working class consciousness, today occasionally seen in brief sparks of action of individual—relatively small organisations.

# Wages for unorganised labour

RENAÑA JHABVALA

THE unorganised sector workers who constitute nearly 93% of the work force, work and live in the most precarious conditions. Often they work at back-breaking labour such as construction work or agricultural labour for a wage that does not even fetch them two square meals a day. 50% of these workers are women who earn less than the male workers in the same employment.

Our experience in organising women workers in the unorganised sector is that they usually do not get a minimum wage for their work. The worst paid tend to be the home-based workers who are generally paid at a piece rate. A study of home-based workers in Ahmedabad city by SEWA found that in 1995 the average earnings per day for these workers varied from a maximum of Rs 22 to a minimum of Rs 6 (see Table 1). This despite the existence of the Minimum Wages Act. It is one of the most powerful labour acts and is the responsibility of the central and state governments to imple-

ment. Its implementation would be a major development initiative.

The National Commission on Rural Labour was set up by the Government of India to look at the socio-economic conditions of rural labour, which makes up over 26% of the total national workforce and more than 44% of the female national workforce (1991 census). The commission, which submitted its report in 1991, emphasised the importance of the minimum wage as a poverty alleviation measure. The commission laid down certain principles to decide a minimum wage. These are: (i) the minimum wage is not the pauper level or poverty level wage; (ii) the minimum wage may also be called the minimum subsistence wage; (iii) the minimum wage must ensure the preservation of the level of efficiency of the worker; and (iv) it must provide for some basic amenities like health and education of children.

Together, these principles indicate that the minimum wage level is the level below which wages should not fall. If they do, the efficiency of the worker will also fall.

In India, the minimum wage is fixed by state governments for different schedules of employment. The method of notification of employment for a schedule and the fixing of the minimum wage is laid down in the Minimum Wages Act. Generally, the better-off states like Punjab and Haryana fix higher minimum wages in each employment category, whereas the minimum wages fixed in poorer states like Bihar and U.P. is much lower.

In 1996, minimum daily wages for agricultural labour varied from Rs 21

TABLE 1

Earnings of Homebased Workers in Ahmedabad 1995		
Occupations	Av. Production for an 8 hour working day	Earnings for an 8 hour day
Bean shellers	16 kg beans	Rs 16.00
Bidi rollers	1067 bidis	Rs 22.20
Bindi makers	288 bindis	Rs 10.00
Cardboard box makers	667 boxes	Rs 6.60
Cement bag cleaners	160 bags	Rs 16.00
Cotton pod shellers	23 kg cotton	Rs 17.10
Embroiderers	8 pieces	Rs 9.60
Fire cracker makers	75 crackers	Rs 14.40
Flower garland makers	16 kg garlands	Rs 16.00
Incense stick rollers	2286 sticks	Rs. 5.71
Papad rollers	5 kg papad	Rs. 17.33
Paper strip sorters	32 kg strips	Rs 11.20
Garment stitchers	24 garments	Rs 14.00

(Andhra Pradesh), Rs 27 (Bihar), Rs 52 (Haryana), Rs 26 (Karnataka), Rs 28 (Madhya Pradesh). It is evident that most states tend to fix a very low minimum wage, even below Rs 35 per day. Not only is this well under the poverty line, even these meagre wages are not usually paid.

**T**he basis for fixation of a minimum wage has been discussed by the Indian Labour Conference and various commissions on labour instituted by state and central governments. Most trade unions agree that the minimum wage should be based on the recommendations of the Indian Labour Conference and the Supreme Court judgment (Workmen of Reptakos Brett vs management) and should include the following components:

- a) Each wage should cover 3 consumption units per earner (2 adult and 2 children).
- b) Each adult intake of food at 2700 calories per day.
- c) Clothing requirements at per capita consumption of 18 yards per annum.
- d) Minimal housing costs.
- e) Fuel, lighting and other miscellaneous items at 20% of above.
- f) Children's education, medical requirement, provision for marriages, old age, minimum recreation including festivals/ceremonies etc. at 25% of the total minimum wage. (This last point added by the Supreme Court judgment cited above).

The minimum wage should also be linked to the consumer price index.

The calculation of minimum wage has been a major area of study for trade

unionists, governments and academics concerned with labour. Since nutrition is the major component of the minimum wage, nutritionists too have been involved in this discussion. Unfortunately, over the years, this issue has been considerably politicised and political economists and planners have consistently reduced the amount considered as the actual minimum nutrition required for a labourer. The minimum 'adequate' diet has given way to the minimum 'affordable' diet.

The required calorie intake has been reduced by experts from a minimum of 2700 calories to 2100 calories for urban labour and 2400 for rural labour. In reality, even the 2700 calorie figure is one for sedentary, not heavy activity. Furthermore, according to these calculations, the diet of children has been scaled down to that of infants. Fruit, milk and non-vegetarian items have all been excluded from the diet.

**B**ased on these scaled down requirements, the union government has recommended a floor-level minimum wage of Rs 35 per day, presumed to support two adults and two children. The following testimony from Shantaben, an agricultural worker from Kheda, Gujarat, shows how the experts fall short of reality.

'Both my husband and I are agricultural workers in Medhav village of Kheda district. My three grown sons also work as agricultural labourers. I have one daughter. She used to work in the fields, but she now works full time looking after the creche in our village.

On days that my children work full time, they need proper nutrition so that they can work a full 8-9 hours.

My son aged 22 years needs the following meals during the day (see Table 2).

When my daughter labours for the whole day, the items she needs to eat are the same. Her intake of Bajra *roti* is less, one *roti* instead of two in the morning, and

two *rotis* instead of three in the afternoon. Her intake of *khichdi* is also a little less at night. However, my daughter needs to eat *gur* and peanuts during the day to keep up her energy, so the cost works out approximately the same.

However, in our village the rate for agricultural labour is Rs 22 a day. So I cannot afford to feed either my son or daughter their full requirements. Milk, vegetables, oil, bananas are excluded or reduced in the diet.'

**M**inimum wage is a powerful means of poverty removal meant mainly for the unorganised, weakest, most vulnerable and hence the poorest sections of workers. The workers in the formal sector as well as those with strong unions, can and do get higher wages through collective bargaining. It is the weak workers—agricultural labour, home based workers, contract workers, child labour, bonded labour, forest workers and so on who get a pitiful wage despite hard labour.

Minimum wages add to the productivity and efficiency of the workforce. Every worker, male or female, requires certain inputs of food, shelter, clothing, medical expenses, child-care and education to maintain a minimum level of efficiency and productivity in his/her work. If a construction worker, for example, remains hungry or ill, her efficiency will fall. This will lead to a vicious cycle of poverty for the worker and low productivity for industry. Furthermore, as India globalises, workers need to raise their efficiency through education and need to be more alert to changing technology. A worker can remain productive and efficient only through payment of a minimum wage.

Minimum wages are a means by which we look after the next generation of workers. Every society must see that its members are able to survive and the children grow up to be useful citizens. However, if a worker is not paid enough to maintain the family, children get malnourished and remain physically and mentally below par as adults. Malnourishment of women workers results in low birth weight of children. 63% of the

TABLE 2

Time	Items	Approx. Cost
7 am	2 Bajra roti (200 gm), Milk 200 gm	Re 1.00 Rs 3.50
10 am	Tea 1 cup	Rs 2.00
1 pm	3 Bajra roti Vegetables (200 gm)	Rs 1.50 Rs 4.00
4 pm	Tea 1 cup	Rs 2.00
8 pm	Khichri 200 gm rice/50 gm dal Vegetables 100 gm Kadhi 100 gm	Rs 1.40 Rs 2.50 Re 1.00
During the day	3 Bananas (local fruit) Oil 50 gm for cooking Masala, chillies	Rs 1.50 Rs 2.25 Rs 2.00
Total (Approx.)		Rs 25.00



nation's under-fives are malnourished, as against 31% in Sub Saharan Africa. 60 million children live below the poverty line and 2.7 million of them will not live to see their fifth birthday. Payment of minimum wages is necessary for a healthy generation.

It is also the principal strategy for the elimination of child labour. The main reason why children in India have to work is that the parents are unable to earn enough for the family. Hence children are sent to work instead of school. In aggarbatti rolling, for example, the piece rates paid are so low that a mother and her two children have to roll aggarbattis for 10 hours to earn a minimum wage. Payment of minimum wages to the adult will ensure that parents do not need to make their children work. Another reason for child labour is that employers can get away by paying less wages to children. Payment of minimum wages to all workers will ensure that children are not hired in place of adults.

Unfortunately the Minimum Wages Act is not taken seriously by the government. In most parts of the country there is a poor implementation of the Act. Agriculture labour, except in the peak season of about a month, generally get 1/2 to 2/3 of the minimum wage; home based workers get less than 1/2. In spite of a statutory minimum wage, the workers are too weak and vulnerable to demand their rights and the government machinery is not geared to help them. Unfortunately, even in government projects such as road construction and forestry, the workers are paid below minimum wages.

Low wage areas exist mainly because of low employment opportunities. Especially in rain-fed rural areas, employment is available for only a few months a year. Local workers out of desperation are then available at sub-minimum wages for more than 9 months. Often these workers are forced to migrate. In the areas where they go to seek work, the wage rates again get depressed to sub-minimum rates.

The government itself is a major employer of labour in areas like construc-

tion, road building, forestry and so on. It generally tries to exempt itself from paying the minimum wage. For this, it uses a variety of methods, including special notifications and the exemption clause (26-2) of the Minimum Wages Act.

According to the Act, only those trades included in the schedule of employments and whose wage is fixed by the state government are covered. Many trades are left out of the purview of the Act, specially homebased ones like garment making, aggarbatti rolling, etc. Inclusion in the schedule requires organised efforts for 5 to 10 years on the part of the workers which expectedly is difficult.

Although the minimum wage is usually fixed as a monthly or daily rate, in actual practice the payment is on the piece rate. This is true for agriculture, road work, home-based work and even for most contract labour. However, the piece rate is usually fixed so low that an average worker working all day will not earn the minimum wage for the day. Also, minimum wages in many states are not linked to the consumer price index and are not revised for 5 to 10 years. The result is that the real wages are continually eroded.

The National Centre for Labour is a national level federation of trade unions for the unorganised sector. It represents six lakh workers in the unorganised sector from across the country and from diverse sectors like agriculture, forests, fisheries, construction, home-based, self-employed and others. 20 founding organizations from 15 states have joined together to form NCL, including the National Federation of Construction Labour, Self Employed Women's Association, National Fishermen's Federation, forest workers unions and unions of agricultural labour.

One of the major campaigns taken up by the NCL is for minimum wages to the unorganised sector. It has formulated the following demands.

**Implementation and enforcement:** NCL demands immediate and forceful enforcement of the Minimum Wages Act by central and state governments. Trade

unions, employers, social organisations and panchayati raj institutions should be involved in the process of enforcement.

Some concrete suggestions are:

- \* Campaign for enforcement of minimum wages on the lines of the literacy or immunisation campaigns.

- \* Tripartite mechanisms involving government, workers and employers at local level to undertake enforcement.

- \* Workers and unions to be given power of inspection and power to file cases under the Act. At present these powers are only with the inspectors.

- \* All government programmes must ensure the payment of minimum wages to all labour including contract labour, temporary labour, casual labour, etc. (without prejudice to existing rights).

*Tripartite mechanisms for the implementation of minimum wages:* The Commission on Rural Labour found that there were different systems in force in the country for the implementation of minimum wages. They found the Act difficult to enforce through the systems of labour inspectors. It is often claimed that there are not enough inspectors to enforce the Act in the rural areas. But the commission found that there did not seem to be a strong co-relation between the number of inspectors and the enforcement of the Act. In Bihar, for example, despite a special Rural Commissionerate and an army of 641 rural labour inspectors, enforcement is dismal. In Tamil Nadu implementation of the Act is entrusted to tehsildars and here too the enforcement is poor as the tehsildars do not take interest. The Act works best in Kerala through the tripartite system which functions right down to the panchayat level. Hillary Pais, Chairman of the Commission's Group on Minimum Wages, described this system as 'inefficient but the most effective,' and recommended it as best suited.

The NCL demands that the workers and employers be part of a tripartite system along with the government for implementation of the Act. Involving the workers in actual implementation will help workers get organised and will create a forum for workers, employers and

other involved parties to talk to one another.

*Minimum employment as part of minimum wages:* Low employment opportunities lead to a downward push on wages. In areas of high unemployment, the wage remain low. At the same time large scale migration also depresses wages. Further, minimum employment is essential for the worker to earn a minimum wage throughout the year. NCL demands that there should be a target of minimum employment of 250 days per year for all workers leading to growth through social justice.

**S**ome practical suggestions for these are:

- \* Direct employment programmes should be targeted to low wage areas and areas with large scale forced migration.

- \* Forestry can be converted into a major employment sector by including local people in replanting, nursery growing, forest produce sale, etc.

- \* Irrigation programmes, if planned well, can increase employment considerably by making land more productive and increasing agricultural output. These programmes should be targeted to the small and marginal farmers.

- \* Cottage industry and artisan production can be encouraged with credit, raw materials supply and linkage to markets.

- \* Urban employment policies like encouragement to vending, support to slum based and home based production, integrating waste collectors processors into the economy, and so on can increase days of work available and raise wages.

*Encourage the organisation of most vulnerable workers:* It is a well known fact that labour laws are best implemented where workers are organised. However, given their vulnerability, these workers cannot get organised without support and a conducive environment. Some suggestions are:

- \* Representation to organisations of these workers, however fledgling, in committees concerned with minimum wages.

- \* Support from government and established trade unions for organising.

- \* Protection from victimisation and loss of work.

*Minimum wages to cover all workers:* NCL supports the proposals to bring in the presently excluded into the ambit of the Minimum Wage Act, without having to go through the long, painful and often unproductive method of schedules. The two suggestion for this are: national minimum wage and general state minimum wage. The national minimum wage should serve as a norm and be based on the criteria recommended by the 15th Labour Conference and supplemented by the Supreme Court (Reptakos Brett judgment) described above. There should not be a floor level minimum wage of Rs 35 as recommended by the Union government, as this will tend to drag the wages far below the poverty line.

**E**ach state should issue a notification for a general minimum wage covering all workers not covered under the schedule. The wage may be fixed by the method prevalent in the state. However the following points must be observed:

- \* The general minimum wage must be linked to the consumer price index.

- \* The general minimum wage should be revised upward every three years so as to increase the real wages and pass on the fruits of economic development to workers.

*No exemption to minimum wage:* Exemption to minimum wage goes against both the concept and practice of minimum wage. The Supreme Court has stated that non-payment of minimum wage is equivalent to forced labour which is prohibited by Article 23 of the Constitution (Sanjit Roy vs State of Rajasthan). Clause 26 in the Minimum Wages Act which allows exemption must be deleted.

*Fixation of piece rates:* In many unorganised sector trades the wages are paid as piece rates. Since these are not fixed under the Act, they are generally far below the minimum wages. It is therefore essential that the piece rates too be fixed under the Act where applicable. The rules should spell out the method of fixation of minimum piece rates. The concept of socially relevant productivity rate may be used.

# Ontology of wage labour

RUSTAM SINGH

IF you are one of those who habitually look at the graffiti on the back of trucks, you would have noticed these lines:

*Chande note ne  
Mera chan pardesi kita.  
(For this blasted money  
My lover has gone away.)*

These lines carry the angst of a separated lover (in this case a woman). The separation is caused by the need to earn a living. The living must be earned at a place which is 'away'. The beloved must go 'there' – there is little work available at the point of departure.

What is the meaning of this 'going away'? It is *exile* for the lover who has 'gone away' but also for the one who is 'left behind'. Although it is only one of them who leaves, from the point where each finds oneself after the departure, the other is away. Who is in greater pain: the one who has gone away, or the one who is away because she has to stay behind?

Yet the money, the sum for which this unbearable situation has occurred need not be a large one: it may just be enough to fill their bellies. Or not even that much. Listen to Cesar Vallejo:

*I have come from Trujillo to Lima.  
I am getting a wage of five soles.*

Clearly for a wage of only 'five soles' the lovers have to stay apart. To grasp fully the sense of their life in 'estrangement', we should read Vallejo again:

*Every day I rise blindly  
to work to live.*

While the one who has gone away 'rises blindly to work' to earn five soles,

the other does the same to ease the pangs of separation. Thus the wage of five soles is their joint wage: it is earned not merely by the one who finds himself at Lima instead of at Trujillo.

We will call this the 'Lima effect' in wage.

Now consider the fact that the worker who has gone away may be not only a lover but also a father (or mother), a son and/or a brother, and the Lima effect gets multiplied many times over.

Then look at the one-worker-one-wage principle in the light of the Lima effect, a multiplied Lima effect. What this tells us is: If pain can get multiplied in the case of a single 'worker in exile', so should his wage in tune with this pain.

As of now, it is only 'physical' pain caused by injury sustained during work which is 'compensated'. But what about pain which is not *physical* in this sense, and which occurs not directly in work but through circumstance connected with work?

It is as if the worker in exile (or even simply a worker) were just a body. And as if it were just *this* body that experiences pain. Is this fundamental reduction just an oversight? Or does it stem from an ignorance about the body? Whatever the case, we need to focus on the nature of the body and on the nature of the *experiencing* of pain.

What, indeed, is the body? Is it an inert entity devoid of a 'soul' – a being that resides within it, in its pores? Even if it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to show the existence of a soul-in-the-body or,

even more appropriately, the body-as-a-soul (it is not the business of philosophy to 'show' things as they might be; it is only to speculate on their probability), the reader should perceive the massive danger in conceiving the body as a soul-less category. Cesar Vallejo certainly knew of this danger when he wrote:

Every day I rise blindly  
to work to live.

**S**urely he is talking of a body which has been robbed of its soul? Surely the 'I' here is the alienated limb of the real I? It is this limb, this spiritless corpse which 'rises blindly to work'. Once the body has been emptied of its soul in this manner, it can be cut, bruised and maimed *without causing it any pain*.

Hence the compensation that is given for injury is not compensation for pain caused by the injury; it cannot be compensation for pain, for *the pain does not exist*: it is only a soul-less body which has been injured, that is, thrown out of gear. The logic of this response to injury would say: discard *this* body and hire another. And if there were no history of the struggle for compensation, this indeed would be the fate of the 'body-worker'.

Given this history, the compensation is a small price the employer has to pay for getting a feel of the soul of the worker. Indeed, it is a token reminder to him (her) that there is a thing called soul – in the worker. That when he hires a worker, he hires him body *and* soul.

'If I am neither purely a body nor even purely a soul but, as it were, a body-soul, what is it in me that experiences pain?'

'Discoursing on pain, we must first conflate two kinds of pain generally accepted: "physical" pain and pain which is "not physical" and say that it is because of the soul-like nature of the body, or rather because the body is indeed a soul, or the soul is a body, that we experience pain. Put this way, each injury to the body becomes an injury to the soul and the soul becomes that body which carries the imprint of each injury, a mouth-wound that speaks of the infinite hurts to the soul-body.'

'If I grasp you correctly, I am this soul-body and it is I who experience pain.'

'We have already spoken of an "I", the "I" which is the alienated limb of the real I, that is, you. I would like to believe that it is the latter that experiences pain. That, in fact, is the only conclusion we can derive from our discussion. But what is the real I? What is you? If we were to trust Vallejo, whose lines you have read above, there is another I, an I which is indefinable but lives somewhere inside the soul-body. Listen to the voice of the master himself:

It isn't as Cesar Vallejo that I suffer this pain. I do not ache as an artist, as a man or even because I'm simply alive. I don't suffer this pain as a Catholic, Mohammedan, or atheist. Today my suffering has no attribution.... Today I suffer purely.'

**T**he remarkable thing about these lines is that the I being talked about here is different from all the other I's of Cesar Vallejo – including the I that is Cesar Vallejo – because only this I is capable of suffering purely. Vallejo the artist or the Catholic or the atheist lacks this quality.

'Yet, what is this suffering that is "pure", having "no attribution"? One way to answer this question is: This is the pain that is a part of the very nature of the being. Which is to say that there is this pain because the being exists. Or even more that the being experiences this pain because it is: this pain is a condition of its "is-ness".'

'You are telling me, in other words, that there is a pain which I experience (or this particular I within me) not because I am a worker but simply because I am.'

'Exactly.'

'And that this pain is different from the pain I experience as a worker.'

'Yes.'

'And different from the pain I experience as a lover or father or son or brother or all the rest.'

'The answer is the same.'

'Then tell me, too, the relation of this pain – of this nameless me – to my pain as a worker, a wage labourer. Or is there no relation?'

'It seems to me this pain has a relation not only with your pain as a labourer but also with your pain as a lover and so on. But I being no better than you, a mere wage labourer, we have to speculate on it together.'

'Therefore, if you were to suffer injury not as a worker but as what Vallejo calls a Catholic or a Mohammedan or an atheist or even as a lover, would your experience of pain be any different?'

'That is a difficult question. Nevertheless, I think it would be different because there is a dimension to pain which is social or, let us say, social as it comes to a point in an individual. Hence one individual may feel more deeply hurt than another by the same degree of pain. For instance, if a son is killed in communal violence, the mother may feel more deeply hurt than the father or one mother more deeply hurt than another within the same community.'

'What you are saying is that the experience of pain is an individual phenomenon and thus varies between individuals depending upon their specific and unique history.... But supposing your pain were pushed to a point where it becomes unbearable. Would you still at that point experience this pain as this unique individual?'

'I don't know.'

'Nor do I. But my hunch is that there is a point beyond which all pain – no matter what its origin and no matter what persona of you is its recipient – opens the door to that wider pain, the pain that you suffer "purely". This you is no longer an I created by history but is, as it were, the I which suffers because it is.'

'That may be so. But I still don't see what relation this I has with my I as a labourer and is my relation of this pain with my pain the same.'

'I think the relation is now clear: it is only a recognition of this I and the pain it suffers that can establish you firmly, in the eye of your employer as something more than a labourer, indeed, a body worker; it posits you and him at the same level of is-ness, for it shows that there is a quality to pain which is constant and which this "mysterious" I of both you and

your employer is capable of suffering equally.'

'A thing that this relation in turn makes clear is: more the layers of being, or, to put it differently, greater the number of *beings* a subject subsumes, greater the chance that it would not be seen as an object: only the *depth* provided to the subject – beginning within philosophy – protects it from the depredations of functional reduction....

'But we'll return to your departure for Lima, a point that interests me more than any other in your biography as a worker (which is my biography as well). In your particular case, when you left Trujillo for Lima, was it only as a worker that you experienced pain?'

'No. Because the departure was also that of a lover.'

'Yet you had already begun to experience the latter pain when you found out that there was no work available at Trujillo?'

'This was so because implicit in this absence of work was already my departure to Lima.'

'Crucial to your pain as a lover, then, was your departure to Lima?'

'Yes.'

'But you suffered this pain even before you had left for Lima, while yet living with your beloved.'

'Yes.'

'Should we say then that this pain was an idea, a mere apprehension?'

'No. It was a fact that had taken place before its time had come. In a way, had already departed for Lima – without actually having done so – when I came to know that there was no longer any work available at Trujillo.'

'But supposing you had not ultimately gone to Lima but had found work again at Trujillo itself. You would have still suffered this pain.'

'That is true. This pain had occurred independently of my final departure for Lima.'

'What I want to know then is: Who would compensate *this* pain which you suffered not as a worker but as a lover and which was caused not by work but by its absence?'

## My story

SUSHILA

MY earliest memories are of living in Rajouri Gardens in a *jhuggi* with my mother, father and paternal grandfather. I remember running to fetch the fillings for grandfather's *hookah* and being given five paise as a reward. I used to go to school wearing a yellow uniform. My father often beat my mother and although he loved me, I was afraid of him.

When I was nine, my mother left Rajouri Gardens and we – my twelve year old brother, my mother, my two baby sisters and I – went to live with her brother. It was from there that my *nani* brought us to her hut in Inderpuri J.J. colony. She really loved me and I used to take her goats to graze near Kirti Nagar. One day my father kidnapped me from there. I was terrified. I feared death in those days. He took me to his village, Chandpur in Dausa, Rajasthan, where he left me with his sister. I was beaten up regularly. But when my mother and grandmother lodged a police case, my father brought me back to Delhi. The last time I saw him was when he came to Inderpuri and stabbed my mother thrice in the neck. I was terrified. Since then I have never met him.

My *nani* lived alone and eked out an existence in construction work as a

\*29 year old Sushila, a garment worker in the Naraina industrial area, speaks to Indrani Mazumdar.



*beldar*. In my childhood she earned seven rupees a day, that is when she had work. But there were times when there was no work and we often went without meals. My mother, brother and I started stitching buttons on readymade garments. The three of us worked all day and together we earned three rupees a day. For two years we worked like this and then in 1979, my mother got work in a factory. My brother and I worked alongside her at a factory in Naraina and earned Rs 35-40 a week. Payment was weekly and it was always below Rs 50.

**T**hen came the button machines and we lost our function. There was no work for us. Destitute and desperate, my mother begged the owner to give us some work. Finally, she was taken on as a thread-cutter at Rs 200 a month. I was eleven years old by then. Often I would go with my mother or in place of her and work all day. Since I was a child, whenever a buyer or someone from the government came, I was hidden in various places. One day I clearly remember being hidden in a trolley, covered with piles of clothes. I remained there, forgotten for hours. Only towards the end of the day did people realize that I was missing! Why did I not come out? Because I was taught to accept whatever was meted out to me. I could never think of protesting or asking anything for myself. I was nervous, afraid and never dreamt that I had any rights. And so everything was accepted. I did not even have the right to resent.

I got married in 1982, and in 1983 I went to live with my husband in Sultanpuri. I was just fourteen years old at the time. My husband was unemployed and lived with his uncle—a hard and cruel man. I was given no food and was constantly taunted because my husband was not earning. He himself would go and eat with one of his aunts. But for me there was nowhere to go. In that social set-up, what could I say? Who was there to speak to? Neglected, lonely and hungry, I lived behind the *ghungat*. Whenever possible, I went to my mother's. For two and a half years I lived like this. I did not want to leave my husband. But he could not keep

me and there was no room for me in his life. He was a useless man.

I could not be a burden on my mother, brother and nani so I went to work in a bulb factory in Lohamandi. The glass cut my hands and fingers and seeing me returning home every day with blood-stained clothes, my mother stopped me from going there after one and a half months.

Finally, I got a job in a garment factory in Kirti Nagar. I was earning Rs 820 a month. This was in 1990. But the older workers harassed me. This is standard practice because older workers see a new worker as a threat. This is what the *maliks* do. They take in some new workers and throw out the older ones. So it is normal for these workers to harass someone new, for they fear that they will lose their jobs. There is no security of work. Most of us are only casual workers in these factories. My mother had worked in a factory for nine years and yet was not permanent, had no ESI (Employees' State Insurance) or Provident Fund.

**I** left the job since I could not take the harassment. Then I went to work in another garment factory in Naraina for Rs 1000 a month. I was also given ESI facilities. After having worked there for some time, the factory closed down. Once again I was without work. My brother who did contract work with a button machine also went through hard times. He was not paid for his work and could not find a new place. Soon, my brother, a hard and productive worker who always maintained that it was not difficult to find work in Delhi, my brother who had helped my husband find work twice—he was out of work. He gradually took to drinking. He tried his hand at selling lottery tickets but could not sustain it. The responsibilities of the entire family fell on me.

My mother finally got a permanent job. However, the workers started getting agitated about the non-payment of minimum wages, even though they were made to sign in the register to that effect. When a union was finally formed, the factory *malik* dismissed them all. Once again she was without a job. Since then she has not

been able to work—no one would employ someone her age.

As my brother's savings depleted, tensions grew in the family. My sisters who were now in high school needed books, clothes and so on. My brother could no longer give that much. He himself had children. These were bad times at home. My mother, now in her forties, hated her dependence, and ours, on my brother's earnings. But I was fortunate to get a job in the biggest factory in Naraina, one of the largest garment exporters in Delhi. I have worked here for the past seven years.

**H**aving worked in the garment industry since childhood, I have learnt many things that are expected only of those who have passed high school and at least know how to read English. My education stopped when I was nine and although I learnt to read and write Hindi, I could not read English. I can do the work of a checker and though I instinctively know the measurements, technically I could not read the specifications written in English. With my younger sisters' help I can now read the measurements.

I am working with a company that has survived these last few years. So many companies had grown earlier on. The company that I am working in now was just a small factory when I started work. Now the *malik* is a *karorpati* (owner of crores). But all around garment factories are closing down. Earlier, a lot of work was available for people working at home. Although the earnings were meagre, work was available. Now there is no work in the home-based sector in Inderpuri. Since our colony is just next to the Naraina industrial area, small work on garments was given out to homes. But over the last four years this kind of work has completely vanished. In places like Mangolpuri or Shakurpur, there was alternative work like *bindi* sticking and so on for home-based workers. Here there is nothing else. All around, garment workers are losing work.

Conditions of work have always been hard, but now the pressure has become acute. I stand all day and work. M

younger sisters would find it difficult to do this. Compulsory overtime is a regular feature. Every day one has to work from 9 am to 8 pm, often till 10 pm. One cannot refuse, otherwise one will lose one's job. I have not had a weekly off for months. It is hard, particularly on women. There should be some restriction on this. Women should be allowed to go home at the latest by six in the evening.

**T**en years ago, women were paid less wages than men in the garment industry. This has changed over the years. Now we get equal wages. Tailoring is almost always done in fabrication units, not in the export companies. Tailors, always men, are generally paid piece-rate, and earn more. But they are not attached to export companies and get no other benefits – no ESI, no PF. In the early stages some export companies had tailoring units in their own factories. But now all this work is given out to fabricators. They do not want us all to work in one place.

In our factory women get equal wages, but no malik wants our number to exceed 30. Because then, I have heard, they will have to provide creches. In the companies where most legal provisions are given – wages fixed by the government, ESI, PF etc., the number of women is always kept below 30. In other places no laws are implemented and regardless of the numbers employed, there are no creches.

Maliks often prefer women workers because we do not ask for anything. We have never been able to say no to any work, however discriminatory. Even now, after I have worked for so many years, I cannot refuse the management's demand to do extra work. I can never ask for leave. No one can take ordinary leave, though compensation is given in our factory. We have to lie and give some extraordinary reason for even half-a-day's leave.

For women there are additional problems. With my own eyes I have seen managers who hold back increments unless the girls please them in other ways. It is a bad thing and gives us a bad name.

I have tried to give my sisters a better life. They have completed college.

One sister married last year. I gave her a gold necklace set. Now I have no savings but I have to do something. I cannot give the younger sister any less when she gets married.

My brother has opened a small shop in the house and I help him out. My salary is now Rs 2700. On my way to work, I place orders for the shop and make the payments. This way I know that money will not be wasted.

**F**or years I felt so ill. My sister-in-law had tuberculosis. Her son Saurabh also contracted it when he was two years old. In our family, we are very careful about medicines, because we are experienced with them. But my sister-in-law was not at all regular with her medicines. My younger sister had developed pleurisy after TB when she was young. My other sister also developed TB. But she was educated and careful about medicines. She is now cured. In the last six years, three family members have had TB. Now my sister-in-law also seems to have been cured. We are clean and careful in our house. But just in front of the house, the sewer overflows and nothing is done about it. When I had a pain in my chest and back, I thought I too had TB. But no doctor could find the reason. Standing all day in the factory, on several occasions, I fainted. I was very ill.

This has been my life. One nice man, who worked at my factory, once tried to talk to me. He wanted to marry me. But I could not agree as he did not belong to my community. Although I personally did not have any feelings about caste, I had to consider my younger sisters' feelings. They would find it hard to get married if I married outside the community. He has left now. Sometimes I used to think – what will happen to me? Who will look after me later on in life? I have now adopted my brother's son Saurabh who is seven years old. He is my son and I do everything for him. I have admitted him to a good school. The fees are very high but I hope to manage. My sister, who got married last year, is educated and teaches in a private school. But she earns only Rs 300 a month.

I have been a member of the Janwadi Mahila Samiti for the last eight years. I first went to them for help regarding my problems with my husband. He signed a document in their office saying he would pay me Rs 250 every month. But he did not get any work and said he had TB and was unable to work. Finally it became clear that nothing was forthcoming. With the help of JMS I retrieved my dowry and his family gave me Rs 13,000 as a settlement. Now my divorce is also through. In these years I have found friends in the JMS with whom I feel at home. They care about me, my life and for others around. I have enrolled 300 members in my area and people come to me for help regarding problems faced by girls and women. Often we are able to help but sometimes we can do nothing.

**I** have participated in many campaigns. 35 of us went to Lucknow before the Babri Masjid was demolished and there was a lot of support for the slogan *mandir bane, masjid rahe*. We collected many signatures condemning the demolition. But there was tension also. Sons of some of the women who had gone with me created trouble and some women backed out. I have also participated in strike demonstrations in Naraina against increases in ration prices and the threat of closures. But I always avoided my own factory. I even went to jail for five days with 11 women from my area.

Our family has traditionally voted for the Congress. My nani used to tell us that she had seen slavery under the British and that it was the Congress that gave us freedom. But in the last two elections, our entire family voted for the hammer, sickle and the star.

I want to do so many things to improve the lot of women, to have better working conditions, more scope for jobs and work. But I do not know the way. I have no time. Whenever I became active in my area, there were so many demands that I could not manage. My family depends on me. I have so many duties. My future now lies with my son Saurabh. I hope I do not lose my job, like so many others.

# An end and a beginning

MUKUL SHARMA

*One more such victory and we are lost.*  
Pyrrhus after defeating the Romans

DEARNE Valley is approximately 180 miles away from London, but direct motorway links along M1 and M25 mean that it can be reached in under four hours. It is an area of 22.5 square miles, located between the two Yorkshire cities of Leeds and Sheffield; a population of 76,000, dispersed over nine settlements; with 16,000 unemployed local people, mostly redundant miners; and the largest single area of derelict land (1400 acre) within the country – the leftover of the coal and associated industries.

Through the 1980s coal, railways, coking and chemical plants were wound up here. Thousands of local jobs disap-

peared with a devastating effect on the local economy. Official unemployment today stands at 20%, twice the national average. In pockets it is even higher.

This is not all. The government now wants a regeneration of the valley. The stakes are high. Millions of pounds of public money are being pumped in. 'The overall aim is to create 4,000 jobs and attract \$620 million as investment over the next five years,' says John Gillis, Director of Dearne Valley Partnership, a body formed by the three local authorities of Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham which surround the area.

John Gillis is confident that their efforts to attract investment and create jobs will reap rewards. 'Strategically the valley is in an extremely good location. And because of the creation of Enterprise Zones, we are receiving a significant

\* I am grateful to Godfrey Hodgson, Rosemary Allen, Joanna Thorpe, Kane Mayhew, Steve Percy and many others for making my field work possible.

number of approaches from developers and companies.'

He is not lying. A liaison officer at the partnership office provides a detailed list of these approaches: German-owned Kostal UK moved into Dearne and now employs 206 people, assembling electro-mechanical switches for the automotive industry. WGF Colcoton and Mion Electronics has arrived, creating 30 full-time jobs for local people. Nearly £45 million worth of private investment has been attracted to this area. Hundreds of companies have inquired about business opportunities.

**H**owever, when talking to Mel Burrell, Managing Director of St. Paul's Developments, the biggest private sector developer in the area, one hears a different voice. He sees two major drawbacks of Dearne: its image as a run-down coal mining area and its relative isolation. The image, with both locals and outsiders, is of severe economic recession, job losses, environmental despoilation.

Kilnhurst is one of the smaller towns within the valley, symptomatic of the structure and problems that make up the other town and villages of Dearne. People talk in Kilnhurst: '...Kilnhurst used to be brilliant... before the pit closed... it'll never come back to that... too much of unemployment... There are new businesses coming in, but they are bringing their own workforce with them... situation may balance out but maybe by then it will be too late.... What we need is shops... but who will use them... everyone is going to use the big supermarkets... and the traffic is terrible.... There is no pride in Kilnhurst... people dump rubbish everywhere... kids hang around in street and older ones do not seem to be interested in the youth club anymore.... We need to put pressure on the council... Rotherham council does not listen to us... Kilnhurst has been let down and the emphasis is now on Rotherham... Rotherham in Bloom, Kilnhurst in Gloom....'

We are told how the British government completed the closure and sale of coal companies a long time back; how the equipment has remained buried under-

ground in prematurely closed mines; how tens of million tones of coal reserves lies unutilised; and the large economic, social and environmental costs of the closure programme.

Both the closure programme of the past and the economic regeneration of the present have a fundamental similarity; to crush labour, to dislocate working people, to kill the community and build new industries with less and less people, with no sense of pride. They describe the closure as an ultimate success but they fear that one more success like this will finish them off: 'We want something tangible... to excite people, to make people talk, to bring the community together, something that people can see and make.'

'It was a shamble the way they went about it and they shattered many family lives. I have been made to feel like an old man, and I am only 46.'

'See the coalmine closures in a context. See the continuity and discontinuity in the decline of deep-mining in UK, which is often portrayed as an industry in terminal decline,' says Paul Jagger, Regional Secretary, Trade Union Congress, sitting in his Leeds office.

**O**ur conversation reveals a broken portrait. At the time of nationalisation in 1947 there were a total of 750,000 men working in 947 mines of UK. Pits closed in the '50s and '60s because of the demand fall and decline of coal intensive industries. At that time, redundant miners had a good chance of obtaining alternative employment. There was less unemployment in the country and there were of course, many pits still in operation. The government's policy towards nationalised industry, and coal in particular, began to change in the early 1980s. The management of National Coal Board adopted a policy such that a large number of pits were closed down because of short-term financial losses. By the time of the miners strike in 1984-85 there were 170 pits and around 180,000 miners. After the strike, the closure rate of the pits intensified. By October 1992 there were just 50 pits remaining with British Coal. The number of men on the books dropped to

50,000. After that, British Coal has closed another 34 pits and less than 10,000 are now left on the books. British Coal was acting under instructions of the Tory government. It was not British Coal that closed pits. It was the political, social and energy policy of the government that responsible.

'Take and overview of any, for example Yorkshire, region,' he says. 'There were over 200 pits in the region in the '70s, but now only 6 are left. There is 80% unemployment in some of the mining villages. In some of the villages of Sheffield, we have now got third generation unemployed people. They have seen their grandfathers sacked from the steel mills in the late '70s. Their fathers were sacked from the collieries in the '80s. They have never seen any job.'

**W**hat has happened to the thousands of redundant miners? What are they doing? What training and education have they got? How useful was the training they received? Where do the coalfield communities now go? Chris Mallander of Coalfield Communities Campaign at Rotherham tries to answer my questions. The Campaign is an all-party association of more than 80 local authorities in existing and former coalmining areas of England, Scotland and Wales. Its aim is to help protect the jobs that remain in the coal industry, and to promote the economic, social and environmental renewal of coal areas.

Grimethorpe in South Yorkshire, Parkside in North West, Silverhill in Nottinghamshire, Taff Merthyr in South Wales and Vane Tempest in North East - all ceased coaling in October 1992. The Campaign recently examined the fate of redundant miners of these five pits: Out of 878 survey respondents, well over half have not found work. 80% of the unemployed have been without a job since leaving their pits. 89% of all respondents were worse-off than they had been at the pit, either because they were unemployed or they were in a job in which they had taken a pay cut. Out of the total unemployed, only 8.9% were in some form of training scheme or education.

The survey also revealed some other important findings:

- \* There is significant hidden unemployment among ex-miners – 30% have been claiming sickness benefit and do not show up on the unemployment register. The real rate of unemployment in Yorkshire coalfields is nearly double the officially recorded figure.

- \* It is wrong to assert that many ex-miners use their redundancy payments to set up successful businesses of their own. Only 3% of the sample were self-employed, and most of those were much worse-off than they had been in the coal industry.

- \* Ex-miners with skills that are transferable to other industries (such as electricians or fitters) are far less likely to be unemployed.

Paul Elenio, an ex-Grimethorpe miner of Barnsley district, met me in the canteen of a training center. He expressed dissatisfaction even after completing the training. 'Jobs – what jobs? There is no job for me since the last three years. Training is fine to learn new skills. But the real problem is to try and get employment after training. Plus, employers expect you to work for peanuts.'

**T**hey are shattered; they are broken. This was apparent in a number of respects. Mining communities had and still have a great capacity and need for work. They possess a great deal of community spirit. These qualities could have provided a fertile ground for economic regeneration. But it is clear that this has not begun in an earnest fashion.

There are rare examples like that of the Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, which plans to use all available resources for the re-industrialisation of the borough by developing the manufacturing sector. There are few people like Peter Moore, Head of the Department of Economic Development of the Council, who can comment courageously. Though the manufacturing sector in general is in decline, the Council took a conscious decision to go in for manufacturing and not the service sector: the workforce and redundant workers of this area fit well

with this sector. There would thus be no mismatch. They have created 4,000 new jobs, though they have in this period also lost 7,000.

**C**oal Investments announce that Markham Main Colliery is back in business. This is an advertisement published in February/March 1995. It claims that all supporters of the coal industry will be delighted to see that Markham Main Colliery is now back in operation. It had for long been the mainstay of employment in the mining village of Armthorpe, located between Doncaster and M18. The mine employed 2,500 men and when British Coal decided to put it into care and maintenance (a beginning to closure) in April 1992, most workers lost their jobs. Now in the ownership of Coal Investments, it is one of the first privatised mines to resume production and its Chairman, Malcolm Edwards, is in a buoyant mood.

Coal in UK is still a good business for the private sector. Coal Investments now have three mines fully up and running: Cwm Gwilli, a small mine in South Wales, and Silverdale and Hem Heath in Midlands, while Markham Main is starting production again. RJB Mining, which bought over British Coal's deep mines and open cast sites, is finding ways of earning record profits. RJB now employs more than 9,000 miners. Output stands at 36 million tonnes a year. Figures for the year 1994, released on 30 March 1995, reveal that RJB increased pre-tax profits by 32%, to £16.1 million, beating its own forecast. All the 34 pits, closed since October 1992, have now been offered to the private sector. Eight have been leased to new owners and more are on the same track.

But this is a changed establishment with new working practices and market strategies, new technologies and niche sales. In Markham Main Colliery, total employment today is 152; the maximum will be 252. It was 1000 under British Coal. Workers have only a temporary piecework agreement and the company hopes to introduce a profit-related bonus system in the future.

Clive Belfield, underground manager of the colliery, in an interview is smugly: 'We are quite selective in our recruitment. There were thousands of applications for jobs, so we could afford it. We don't have any one man, one job thing. We don't accept unions. You can be a member of a trade union but we will not collectively negotiate with the trade union. We will only negotiate with our workforce.'

This is a common trend in Yorkshire and Humberside, with all the six privatised large-pits not recognising the union to negotiate pay, working conditions, collective rights. As Paul Jagger, AUC regional secretary at Leeds also suggests: 'They impose themselves on workers. The workers are really frightened. The union strongly fears that the employers will further curtail the wage level and workers rights, and also compromise with safety rules.'

**T**his is the last deep mine in South Wales. Cynon Valley in South Wales is an area of contrasts. In the north, the beauty of Brecon Beacons National Park enhances local life; in the south, large patches of dereliction provide a different environment. The Tower Colliery is located in Cynon Valley, 40 km north west of Cardiff. Coal has been mined in this area since the end of the 17th century. The colliery, which produces semi-anthracite coal, was established in 1864 and passed through various hands until the formation of the National Coal Board in 1947. It is the last of over 200 deep mines in South Wales.

The Welsh Coal industry is dying. Norma Barry of the Energy Policy Division and Paul Demery of the Statistical Directorate at Cardiff explains: 'At the time of the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947, the National Coal Board owned 222 pits in Wales, employing some 1,20,000 men and producing 25 million tonnes. Following the privatisation of British Coal at the end of 1994, only one deep mine remained, employing some 250 men. Around 4,500 are employed in the open-cast sector. There are some 82 small, private, licensed mines employing



1,300 men.... The privatisation of the industry has now been completed here. The main players in the industry are Celtic Energy, RJB Mining, Betws Anthracite and, of course, George Tower Anthracite.... Celtic's buy-out of the open-cast business in South Wales for around \$90 million was the second largest in Wales. The company expects the 1994-95 output to approach three million tonnes. RJB Mining expects to produce some 2.3 million tonnes every year over the next five years.

**I**t is against this background that British Coal decided to close down the Tower Colliery. In October 1993, it started scaling down production targets. Then, at the end of the year, half the pit's workforce was made redundant. Finally the colliery was closed in April 1994. Though Tower was a modern, highly profitable mine and had made profits of \$28 million in the three years preceding the closure, British Coal stated: 'Viable production and sales of coal mined at Tower Colliery are "high risk" because of poor geology and falling demand for coal of Tower's quality in South Wales.... In today's highly competitive energy market, Tower is unable to succeed.'

The miners and their union decided to fight the closure. They decided to go for the Modified Colliery Review Procedure (MCRP) to fight for the pit. Under this, the workers with a majority vote can ask for a review and the fabric of the mine is maintained in accordance with the procedure laid down during the review. But in spite of such a decision by the workers at a general meeting in 9 April 1994, British Coal decided to pursue the closure, following aggressive and dubious tactics. It offered \$9,000 as extra redundancy money if individual workers agreed to close the pit. As a last resort, it threatened workers with compulsory redundancy and stopped all coal production and development work.

The Welsh people rallied behind the miners. The issue was propelled on to wider stage by Ann Clwyd, Labour MP for Cynon Valley, when she, along with 67 year old retired miner, Glyn Roberts,

went on an underground stay-in protest. Meanwhile, above ground protest rallies continued. The campaign paid off. British Coal reversed its decision and announced that Tower would remain in production.

But the company retaliated by announcing a paycut of \$95 a week for lower miners. They would lose the offer of enhanced redundancy terms – up to \$30,000 in some cases. Most important, Tower Colliery was not put under the MCRP and so the miners did not have protection of the review procedure.

Wayen Thomas, one of the younger Tower miners, recalls: 'British Coal was setting us up for revenge. The pressure was intense. We were hit from all directions.' Thus, the miners once again voted to accept the closure of the colliery on 19 April 1994. This was the death of a pit, but inherent in it was the birth of a new phase of struggle.

**T**he colliery closed on 22 April 1994. However, the miners wanted their pit back and were even willing to try and buy it. They met again on 6 May and voted to buy the pit and decided to put in \$2,000 each from their redundancy money. Within four days of this decision, they raised \$350,000 and opened a bank account.

After successfully building a professional team, they raised \$8,000 from every worker and bought the pit for \$82 million, a great victory for the workers cooperative. On 1 January 1995, they marched back to work and reopened the Tower Colliery, as its proud owners. In that historic moment the miners were joined by thousands of people. The miners company, Goetre Tower Anthracite, represents the only buy-out by the cooperative owned completely by workers after the closure and privatisation of coal mines in Britain.

In this company all the workers are shareholders. The company has won orders for three years production of anthracite. The miners work 10-11 hours a day. They have evolved a new, higher wage structure and are active members of the union. They fervently hope that this last deep mine in South Wales will last.

# Democratisation at an impasse

VISHWAS SATGAR

AFTER decades of struggle against the apartheid regime, the release of Nelson Mandela on 2nd February 1990 and the subsequent unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), heralded the beginning of a transition to democracy in South Africa. The often tenuous negotiations that ensued between the regime and the liberation movement finally culminated in a transitional power sharing arrangement. Hailed as the South African 'miracle', this power sharing political order has entered a cross-roads.

Basically the underlying economic transition, which is essential to ensuring a stable and consolidated democratic order is being subverted by the global onslaught of the Washington Consensus (also known as the neo-liberal agenda). The echo of fundamentalist 'free market' fashions are increasingly resonating in the policy making environment. As a result, the catchwords of economic policy have become privatisation, trade and exchange control liberalisation, fiscal restraint, contractionary monetary policy, 'free trade' led industrialisation and a deregulated labour market. The latter policy thrust representing a direct attack on the progressive labour movement in South Africa.

To provide a brief glimpse of the immediate struggle against the neo-liberal agenda confronting the South African labour movement, this article will, first, provide a brief background to the labour movement in South Africa. Second, it will highlight the broad strategic approaches being debated. In the third instance the current impasse within the South African transition would be magnified. Last, it will

sketch out the key challenges confronting the South African labour movement in order to roll back the neo-liberal agenda.

The labour movement in South Africa is being led by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). A historical periodisation of the labour movement in South Africa situates COSATU within the third wave or generation union movement to emerge in South Africa. In the 1920s, black unionism was led by the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) until it finally disintegrated mainly due to leadership rivalries. In the fifties, a second wave of unionism emerged, spurred on mainly by the 1946 black mine workers strike and also the resistance to the electoral ascendancy in 1948 of the racist National Party. In 1955, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was formed with a clear political orientation and alignment to the liberation movement led by the African National Congress. Later banned, SACTU leadership was either arrested and sentenced to long prison sentences or was forced into exile.

This created an organisational vacuum for about a decade until a dramatic turning point in 1973. The reluctance of employers to concede basic recognition and organisational rights to black trade unions resulted in a wave of strikes unleashing a militant surge among the black working class, finally translating into the formation of strong plant based unions. By the end of the seventies, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was formed with most of its union organisers and activists keen to defend the gains made on the shop floor.

Thus, they were not inclined to give the unions an overtly political agenda. This placed FOSATU at the centre of heated exchanges between itself and other general workers unions that were linked to the ANC underground and later the United Democratic Front. The ensuing debates were labeled as 'workerist versus populist'. Finally, around 1984-85 unity was forged amidst serious mass resistance against the apartheid regime. Ungovernability prevailed in most townships and the liberation movement was gearing up for a new phase of armed struggle – people's war. Finally, COSATU, committed to building one-union per industry and galvanising the working class against the apartheid regime, was formed in 1985.

**W**ith the collapse of Eastern Europe or the second world in 1989, the debate on strategy in South Africa has not polarised into those for and against the barrel of the gun. In other words, being leftist is not defined by the extent to which there is commitment to the violent overthrow of the state. The debate has moved beyond 'revolution versus reform' and the transformative model emerging is sometimes characterised as structural or revolutionary reform, in order to achieve socialism. Within COSATU structural reform is a contested notion. At one pole of the debate are advocates of transformative unionism; at the other are advocates of strategic unionism. Both perspectives envisage an engagement with the current political terrain that is proactive and which straddles the factory floor and broader community alliances. For instance, around 1987/8 the mining industry was confronted with a serious slump. The 'costs' of deep level mining were prompting the need for restructuring the industry. The National Union of Mineworkers confronted this challenge proactively and, at a meso level, was able to draw in the government and other social forces into a restructuring process.

However, the point of departure between transformative unionism and strategic unionism relate to the extent to which the class struggle can be advanced.

For advocates of transformative unionism there is a recognition that democratisation allows for a fluid power equation. Essentially, the transformation of the state, and the new Labour Relations Act,<sup>1</sup> which has created an institution for co-determination and/or autonomous self management, holds out the prospect for the public service to be autonomously self managed. For example, schools or police stations or even hospitals could be autonomously managed by workers such that the rationality and instrumentality of hierarchical management is removed. This scenario of the 'withering away of the state' not only contributes to the de-bureaucratisation of the state but is also congruous with ensuring efficiency and delivery of essential services to citizens. In the private sector, autonomous self management has immense opportunity to take root within industries that are being de-industrialised. In terms of strategic unionism, it is essentially anchored in an analysis which suggests that the conjunctural configuration of class forces in South Africa requires a class compromise and hence democratisation is equivalent to co-determination.

**I**n the aftermath of 2 February 1990, the national liberation movement in South Africa led by the African National Congress regrouped within the country and the kernel of the movement is now constituted of a tripartite alliance between the ANC, COSATU and the SACP. The negotiations on transitional arrangements ensured a democratic breakthrough which produced an electoral majority for the ANC led alliance in the April 1994 elections and the more recent local government elections. In numeric terms the ANC led alliance has at least 67% electoral support in the new South Africa. To ensure that the economic foundations

1. The new Labour Relations Act was negotiated in 1995 between labour, government and business. Provisions related to the creation of an institution called a 'workplace forum' allow for three possible models to emerge. The first is a statutory model and the second a statutory trade union centred model. Both these models have three competencies, mainly, information disclosure, consultation and co-determination. The third is a non-statutory model and is implicit within the law. This can be defined as an autonomous self management model.

of the new South Africa are democratised the tripartite alliance formulated a reconstruction and development programme (RDP)<sup>2</sup>. The thrust of the RDP is to address the economic deprivation suffered by majority of people under apartheid.

**B**ut, once the ANC led alliance entered government, the imperative of sending the 'right signals' to the old power bloc – the white minority (excluding democratic whites aligned to the liberation movement), the different fractions of South African capital, foreign capital and 'Washington', took political precedence. As a result the RDP has become increasingly diluted, with the first RDP White Paper displaying a shift to accommodate the neo-liberal agenda.

Subsequently, a macro-economic policy was formulated by the new Finance Ministry, which, draped in the rhetoric of wanting to advance the RDP, proposes the following: privatisation, fiscal austerity,<sup>3</sup> high interest rates or conservative monetary policy, phased exchange control liberalisation, tax holidays to attract foreign investors, a deregulated labour market and a social accord which has all the elements of a conventional incomes policy. The latter policy instrument has the temerity and arrogance to propose wage restraint in a context where the incomes ratio between the upper and lower ends of the labour market is 1:24 and the Gini coefficient is 0.6, one of the highest indicators of income inequality among developing countries. In short, South Africa has a poor working class.

At a higher level of abstraction, South Africa has a democratic government with a mandate to represent the interests of the previously oppressed

2. Essentially, the constituent parts of the RDP are as follows: (i) Basic needs policies; (ii) Human resource development; (iii) Building the economy through industrial transformation; (iv) Democratisation of the state; (v) Implementation through a people driven process.

3. Fiscal austerity refers to the budget deficit target the government has set. Essentially, the government wants to reduce its deficit from about 5% to 3.5% over the short term. However, South Africa does not have a large external debt and most progressive economists are actually arguing for an expansionary fiscal policy.

majority, while at the same time it is using its newly acquired power to manage a colonial economy that benefits the old power bloc. Essentially, this paradox of democratisation has caused a drift of the ANC led alliance within the government towards the centre-right. Increasingly, the political challenge of placing the interests of the majority who voted the government into power, at the centre of the transition, is dissipating.

**T**o ensure the transition to democracy in South Africa does not miscarry the aspirations of the previously oppressed, the labour movement in South Africa is attempting to roll back the neo-liberal agenda. At an economic policy level the search for a new convergence has begun. COSATU, besides preparing a thorough-going critique of the new macro-economic policy and its implications, particularly for the black majority, has also engaged the government and the tripartite alliance in a process to define a new economic approach to the transition. A second major challenge is to ensure the neo-liberal agenda does not 'liquidate' the labour market in South Africa. In other words, South Africa has a flexible labour market and the direction for labour market policy is re-regulation rather than deregulation.

In this regard COSATU has successfully negotiated a new Labour Relations Act which although providing clear advances for the working class, still fell short of certain demands like legislated centralised bargaining, a prohibition against scab labour and the removal of lock-out provisions. Currently, COSATU is also engaged in a negotiations process to reform the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Wage Act. Although these reforms will not produce maximalist outcomes, the challenge confronting COSATU is to ensure they are deepened over time.

In the third instance, building a countervailing capacity to the neo-liberal agenda requires an attempt to drive transformation from below. This means devising an approach to the implementation of workplace forums, in order to deepen

democratisation of the state and the workplace, that ensures autonomous self management. In addition, COSATU through its struggles in the late eighties and early nineties was able to secure, at a macro level, a tripartite public policy making body, which in the current context has allowed COSATU to inform policy relating to public finance, trade and industry, labour market and development strategy. This institution is increasingly coming under attack and there are calls to shut it down. As an institution that democratises the public policy making process, it is being defended by COSATU.

The fourth challenge is to ensure global solidarity against the onslaught of the Washington Consensus and its fundamentalist vision of 'free market' modernisation. COSATU has, in this regard, engaged within the Indian Ocean Rim initiative with unions in Southern Africa and even the two leading trade union centres, WCFTU and ICFTU. Finally, to ensure decisive confrontations with the neo-liberal agenda, COSATU has to build a strong organisation. In this sense, it is imperative to modernise unions to meet the challenges of the new labour law dispensation and to fight for a progressive post-apartheid society. COSATU has begun meeting this challenge by establishing a Future of Unions Project and has also begun working with the smaller federations<sup>4</sup> which has ensured unity in practice and within the policy making arena.

**T**he 'new' South Africa has not embarked on an irreversible path. With leaders of moral and political stature like Nelson Mandela, it should be possible to open up a new trajectory such that there is a better life for all rather than a few. In this regard the South African labour movement led by COSATU has a decisive role to play and serious challenges to confront. Aluta Continua! The struggle continues.

4. The National Confederation of Trade Unions (NACTU) and the Federation of South African Labour (FEDSAL) have combined membership of about 300,000. COSATU's stands at 1.6 million. Essentially, 20% of the formally employed are unionised in South Africa.

# A bumpy road ahead

A. THOTHATHRI RAMAN

MORE than any other segment, organised labour has been most affected by the last six years of economic reforms. While the reforms may have increased job opportunities, put more money in consumer pockets and created new wealth, they have also severely affected the tendency for unionisation. As the service sector share in the total economy, which is now more than half, increases, the large organised unions, collective bargaining and militancy, hallmarks of the collective expression of labour in the manufacturing sector, are likely to ebb away. The saving grace, however, is that the individual workman rather than the organised union, is more aware of his rights than ever before and is willing to support the creation of institutions and laws for protecting his interests.

'European governments are privatising state owned industries. France has sold off Air France's subsidiaries and intends to sell off France Telecom, Thomson and other state holdings. Measures are being introduced across Europe which will make labour markets less rigid.

The Netherlands, Italy, Belgium and Spain have all introduced changes in their employment laws which have made it easier to hire and fire workers and moderate growth in wages.' (Sir Leon Brittan, Vice President, European Union)

What is true of the more mature European markets will ring true for India too, with the economy in the grip of cataclysmic changes affecting both the private sector and state enterprises. Whether or not the organised central trade unions owing affiliations from the most moderate right to extreme militant left agree, the character of employment is changing fast. Interestingly, it is the government rather than the unions that seems to be sensitive to these developments.

The official reading of developments in the organised labour movement in the country is that labour rather than organised unions has taken economic reforms in its stride. Ideologically, this has created a paradox: the worker's interests and aspirations have changed, while the organisations supposed to represent them have remained rigid. As a result, most of



the new jobs being created, mainly in the prosperous service sector, will remain ad hoc, contractual or outright casual. Without any means of organisation, any inclination or opportunity for collaborative action, these workers of the new century are unlikely to ever get unionised.

**T**he manufacturing sector, government and the largely government-owned banking system, however, continue to register robust growth, promising a continuous increase in the number of people joining the ranks of the organised unions. Even here, there are conflicting estimates about the number of people joining the unions. The unions claim an increase in numbers while the managements argue that there is a marked tendency for new labour to remain outside the union system. The government continues to maintain a silence on the only means of verifying this claim, the National Labour Census of 1989. Even this 'outdated' information is unlikely to resolve the dispute, as many workmen are products of the reforms process which gathered momentum only after 1991.

As shifts takes place in the organised labour union movement due to the reforms process, the following issues become relevant:

**Reforms and labour unions:** Protaganists of economic reform among the government and labour unions point out that the trade union movement in India has taken the economic reforms well. Labour retrenchment, inevitable in any reforms process, has by and large been smooth. Even in the National Textile Corporation (NTC), where maximum job cuts had been proposed consequent to the new industrial policy, more than 40,000 jobs have been slashed purely on a 'voluntary basis'. The flip side is that while job cuts have so far been effected with adequate compensation, either through internal sources and/or from the National Renewal Fund (NRF) mainly in the public sector enterprises (PSE), the worst is yet to come. In many of the segments affected by reforms, labour unions have not yet been activated. For instance, in the financial sector where reforms have been most

widespread, there has been no dramatic change in the attitude of labour unions in resolving disputes with managements.

'What is in evidence is a softening of the approach – whether it is computerisation, productivity or wage negotiation,' says a senior banking department official in the Ministry of Finance. While broadly agreeing with this view, leaders such as R.N. Godbole, General Secretary of the All India Bank Officers Confederation (AIBOC), claiming a membership of 1.5 million, concede that by soft-peddling computerisation major concessions have been won in bankwise talks with the State Bank of India management. For the unions, the near failure of the 29 November 1991 nationwide *bandh* against the new economic policy, the first such attempt coinciding with the launch of economic reforms, was a clear omen of the shape of things to come.

**Strike or lockout?** The trend suggests that beginning 1993, a dramatic shift has taken place in the balance between management and labour, with the manday loss figure suggesting that managements are flexing their muscle by locking out units rather than workmen forcing the hand of management through strikes. While many of the lockouts have possibly been the direct result of a strike action, as in the recent case of Premier Automobiles, the trend suggests that the managements prefer to close down shutters rather than settle outstanding disputes.

Apart from such evidence, the experience of arbitrators such as the Bureau of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR) points to an increasing intolerance of the managements to calls

for strikes. While unwelcome as a record as BIFR is a quasi-judicial body, a senior official of the Bureau says the trend suggests that reforms are biting in an expected fashion. Given a chance, managements would rather opt for lock-out and ultimate closure rather than continue to run a sick unit if they can help it. This official also endorses the doomsday prediction that Indian labour has little idea of what it means to work in an economy under total transformation. Economic reforms have not yet begun to have their real impact. Large scale retrenchment, an explosion in unemployment rates and a general nationwide breakdown of industrial peace, all of which are the hallmark of an economy turning over on its back, has yet to come.

**National Renewal Fund:** The national renewal fund (NRF), meant to bale out the workmen affected by the negative fallout of economic reforms has been reduced to a national retrenchment fund merely for the PSUs, thanks to wilful neglect by the national labour unions. Unable to appreciate or understand the potential of this first-ever attempt to provide massive outside funding to labour reforms, the unions have all but reduced the NRF to a convenient vehicle for fund-starved public sector units to cut jobs.

NRF's role was initially to facilitate retraining, redeployment and provide monetary compensation to workmen affected by the reforms process. Later, it was to evolve into a social safety net to guarantee sustenance wages to workers while waiting in the unemployment queue. The funds corpus was to gradually increase over the years, though the reverse has actually taken place (see table). Similar external aid funds have already proved their worth in the economic transitions of Latin American countries, Brazil and Mexico.

Mandays Lost (in millions)		
Year	Strikes	Lockouts
1991	12.42	14.00
1992	15.31	16.12
1993	05.61	14.68
1994	06.65	14.33
1995	05.72	10.57
1996*	01.51	01.90

Source: Labour Bureau, Shimla

\* January-April

Note: The way labour statistics are presented by the Labour Ministry and its research wing Labour Bureau, Shimla, highlights the kind of confusion that prevails. The variation in the figures for strikes and mandays lost from both sources is significant.

NRF Corpus		
Year	Corpus (in Rs crore)	Amount used
1992-93	829.66	688.72
1993-94	1040.00	542.20
1994-95	700.00	261.00
1995-96	200 (X)	

Source: Ministry of Labour

Strangely, while the NRF is languishing without direction, none of the major trade unions have a clear position on the subject. There is no understanding that that NRF is not meant for workers 'welfare' but is a fund to help them keep their jobs. 'It is a pity that a fund which was meant to guarantee jobs through retraining, relocation of personnel and even creation of new avenues of employment, has become a vehicle for settling severance claims,' says a senior labour ministry official.

Considering that out of 1797 sick companies registered under the BIFR as of 31 May 1995, only 141 were from the state-owned sector and that the national fund created for workers welfare is being cornered by the PSUs alone, says much about the country's trade union movement. That of the amount spent so far under the NRF merely Rs 50 crore has been earmarked for training, while the bulk has gone in for the Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) provides further evidence that the entire NRF scheme is lopsided and has been misunderstood. Leaders from CITU, INTUC and BMS feel that the NRF, in its present form, will not help anyone. The labour unions' neglect of the NRF stems from their perception that the unions have little or no role in training, retraining and redeployment of their members.

**T**he World Bank aided NRF, launched with much fanfare at the start of reforms process in 1992, has been meandering, bringing less and less into the corpus in subsequent years. While the corpus continues to erode, even the percentage utilisation of available funds has been abysmal through the years. The fund was to have been constituted into two parts, National Renewal Grant Fund (NRGF) and Employment Generation Fund (EGF), though no progress has been made in this direction.

On the job training as well as retraining for job change for workmen affected by changes in business plans of the company is part of the NRF mandate, though much can be said about how this has been fulfilled. The latest available figures at the end of September 1996

suggest that the Director General of Employment and Training under the Ministry of Labour, one of the 13 nodal agencies for the project, had in fact reduced its demand for NRF assistance by half, from Rs 10 crore budgetary provision in 1995-96 to Rs 5 crore during the 1996-97. The DGET could only train around 8270 workers from the start of the NRF scheme, of whom merely 1422 workers have been redeployed.

*Wages or productivity?* The post-reform period in many organised sectors of employment introduced the element of productivity in wage negotiations. The trend started with the textile, plantation and steel workers during the early '90s and has since become a *sine qua non* in PSU wage agreements beginning 1993. Says Laxmidhar Mishra, Secretary Labour in the Union government, 'All the industry-wise wage agreements contain specific targets for productivity. Wherever restructuring has been ordered, such as in Hindustan Fertiliser or Fertiliser Corporation of India, the corporate plan contains productivity as one of the key factors.' Leaders from the major trade unions concede the fact that productivity is no longer a contentious issue with them.

*Who is the fairest of them all?* As the reforms proceed it is important to know who will lead the organised trade union movement in the country. Which of the five major unions has the maximum membership? This is one of the most contentious issues that trade unions have had to face. The first two on the honours list, INTUC and BMS, have been locked in a battle for supremacy since 1989. But the final arbitrator, the Ministry of Labour, has kept the evidence which would unequivocally establish the winner, close to its chest.

The controversy began soon after the results of the last membership verifi-

cation survey carried out in 1989 were leaked out in mid-1992, suggesting that the Congress-backed INTUC had finally been unseated by the BJP-led BMS in terms of number of constituents. The INTUC was stated to have 27 lakh members on its rolls, while the BMS had staked its claim at 30 lakh members. To be recognised as the top-dog among national trade unions not only confers prestige but also bestows a grab-bag of benefits which the traditional leader of the pack is unwilling to forego. The membership figures become sacrosanct in deciding on the number of seats to be allotted to different unions in various government committees, PSU boards, wage negotiation committees and so on.

The special tripartite committee constituted on 12 November 1991 at the instance of the Ministry of Labour to consider the impact of new industrial policy on labour and other related matters, has remained ineffective because it has a solitary member from the national unions and that too from INTUC, whose status as the 'dominant national union' is under a cloud.

**T**he issue of membership domination has been further complicated by the unions raising additional claims of membership after the 1989 survey. According to R. Takkar, general secretary of INTUC, 'The Central Labour Commissioner (CLC) took more than two years to merely convene a meeting of unions to verify the 1992 provisional figures. The meeting convened on 2 October, however, could not resolve outstanding issues with membership verification still in limbo.

*Amendments to labour law:* The Subramanian Swamy panel has expressed a desire to club the following acts: Fatal Accidents Act 1855, Trade Union Act 1926, Industrial Employment (standing orders) Act 1946, the Factories Act 1948, the Dock Workers (regulation of employment) Act 1948, the Contract Labour (regulation and abolition) Act 1970, Bonded Labour System Abolition Act 1976, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Inter-state Migrant Workmen (regulation of employment and condition of service)

Unions	Official 1980 (membership in lakhs)	Provisional 1989
INTUC	22.36	27
BMS	12.11	30
CITU	3.31	18
HMS	7.62	14
AITUC	3.44	9

Act 1979, the Mines Act 1952 (amended 1983), Dangerous Machines (regulation) Act 1983, Industrial Disputes Act (1947) (amended 1984), Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986, and the Workmen's Compensation Act 1923 (amended upto 1986).

It may also be noted that the 1978 industrial relations bill has lapsed and the 1992 Ramanujam committee bill has not been introduced, nor has the 1995 Subramanian Swamy panel bill. The national labour unions, despite their organisation and ideologies, have by and large failed to rationalise the multifarious laws covering their constituents. In fact, the unions themselves are still registered under a pre-war legislation – the Trade Union Act of 1926!

**T**here is today a greater sensitivity and understanding about the need to simplify laws. For instance, when the comprehensive amendment to the Provident Fund Act was introduced late last year, though it initially met with stiff resistance by the national unions barring CITU, they eventually endorsed its provisions. The amendments introduced a modified pension scheme covering almost the entire organised labour force.

The labour unions, despite their best intentions, have been unable to forge a common approach to simplifying labour laws, clubbing many of the conflicting provisions contained in different laws and scrapping altogether some legislations. The first attempt in 1969 at the behest of the National Commission of Labour resulted in a comprehensive industrial relations bill which was introduced in the Parliament in August 1978. It was allowed to lapse. A second such attempt in 1990 by veteran trade unionist G. Ramanujam also resulted in a draft bill for a comprehensive labour legislation in 1992. Unfortunately, despite a serious debate, it too was consigned to cold storage.

A third attempt, this time at the initiative of the Ministry of Commerce which appointed the Commission on Labour Standards under the chairmanship of Subramanian Swamy, also resulted in an omnibus bill. This has yet to see the

light of day. Meanwhile a clutch of draft piecemeal legislations to amend the Trade Union Act, the Industrial Disputes Act and the Contract Labour Act, along with a new bill for construction labour have been placed before Parliament for discussion.

*Can workers manage their own affairs?* Managing their own affairs has always remained a tantalising dream for workmen, though evidence suggests that worker participation in corporate affairs has at best remained notional or ornamental. The banking industry, where the workers have the maximum sway on the board, has treated them merely as necessary appendages and at times even as vehicles to carry across the management's point of view. The State Bank of India had R.N. Godbole, general secretary of the AIBOC on its Board. But the management could push through the bankwise agreement on computerisation in the mid-1980s, even while Godbole's own outfit was resisting the accord.

None of the nearly 10 worker cooperative run companies which have attracted wide media attention – Kamani Tubes, Sirsilk, New Central Jute Mills and so on – are viable and all of them are under the care of BIFR. Information available with the BIFR suggests that workers cooperatives typically suffer from lack of financial muscle to raise additional capital, lack of financial and marketing skills and often even lack the needed human resources management skills.

**T**he road ahead is certainly bumpy for the organised unions unless they identify the shifts and adjust themselves to the changed demands of their constituent members. Such a shift, far from re-establishing the power of collective bargaining would also reassure the millennium workmen that there will be help should they require it. This would, however, demand a complete change in attitudes and greater responsiveness of the leadership which can come about only through openness and a willingness to learn. Eastern Europe and communist China have set standards of how different the future of the organised unions could be.

# On worker takeovers

SHARIT K. BHOWMIK

INSTANCES of worker takeovers in India are fairly recent as compared to some of the more developed western countries. However, there are indications that their number is likely to increase in the future. The steady increase in sick or closed industries due to mismanagement has prompted workers to take over some of these units in order to save production and employment.

The legal backing for these moves came in the wake of the Sick Industries (Special Provisions) Act of 1985. The Act proposed that one of the means of revival could be through 'lease of the industrial undertaking of the sick industrial company to any person, including a cooperative formed by the employees of the undertaking' (Article 18(2)(i)). The Board of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR) constituted under the Act is empowered to undertake action in this respect after evaluating the viability of the proposals.

There have been a few such cases of worker takeovers since the Act came into effect. The first was Kamani Tubes at Bombay which has received a great deal of media coverage. Subsequently, other industrial units such as New Central Jute Mills in Calcutta, Kamani Metals and Alloys and Hes Watch Company, both Bombay based, were taken over after the workers formed cooperatives. These cooperatives were given the total share holding of their respective companies at nominal rates. Hence the cooperatives

own their respective companies. Some conditions have been imposed by the BIFR which affect the functioning of these companies which we will discuss later.

Even before SICA came into effect there were a number of instances of worker takeovers in tea plantations, small and medium scale industries. In Tripura five tea plantations are being run by their workers since the early 1980s; West Bengal and Assam have one each which started in the mid-1970s. In all cases the takeovers were through worker cooperatives. In Calcutta there are at least 20 small and medium scale industrial units which are owned and managed by worker cooperatives since the early 1980s. These units are engaged in a variety of productive enterprise such as pharmaceuticals, manufacturing of machinery and tubes, printing ink, hosiery, electrical components and so on. The fact that these cooperatives have survived for more than a decade and a half, with little or no assistance from the government, is itself a measure of their success.

Worker self-management schemes are undoubtedly the most effective means of workers' control in industry, provided they are run along democratic lines based on the principles of cooperation. Besides worker cooperatives there are other schemes such as worker buyouts and worker shareholders.

Unfortunately, despite the impressive track record of the existing worker cooperatives, their significance seems

to be glossed over by those interested in alternative policies. Indeed, the current debates on industrial policy range around the pros and cons of the state sector versus private enterprise. Neither the trade unions nor those critical of privatisation have tried to seriously consider the possibility of developing a third sector, namely, a workers' sector in industry.

**T**he relationship between workers' self-management and trade unions in India is complex. The major national trade union federations in the country have remained indifferent to the idea of self-management. At the same time every successful case of worker's takeover has enjoyed the active backing of the respective trade union with the union motivating the workers to form the cooperative and take over the concerned unit. This type of initiative, however, remains only at the local level. The local union leaders have to take a pragmatic stand as they are faced with a concrete problem – if the industrial unit shuts down, workers will lose their jobs. Hence when help does not come from any quarter for revival of the unit, the workers and their trade unions have to devise means of helping themselves. This pragmatic approach has guided the formation of most of the existing worker cooperatives.

The main drawback of this approach is that the cooperatives largely remain isolated local endeavours. In many cases they do not have links with other cooperatives, even though the trade union may be the same. This is especially true of the worker cooperatives in Calcutta. The workers in almost all cooperatives are members of the CITU and they were motivated to take over their respective units by the local CITU leaders. These cooperatives nonetheless remain as local initiatives and the CITU at the state level rarely recognises the achievements of these workers in taking over and managing the means of production. There is also no attempt at trying to establish a network among these cooperatives to form a joint forum to deal with common problems. Several of these cooperatives are not even

aware of the existence of the other similar ventures.

The situation of the tea plantation workers' cooperatives in Tripura is somewhat different. Here too the workers are members of the CITU but there has been a concerted move by the union for formation of these cooperatives. When the first Left Front government was elected with an overwhelming majority in 1978 it was saddled with a tea industry which had a number of sick or closed plantations.

Tea is important for Tripura's economy as it is the major industry in the organised sector of the state. The government did not have the resources to revive the sick units or to nationalise them. Some trade union leaders in tea suggested that worker cooperatives could serve as a means of reviving some of the closed plantations. The result has been positive as five of the plantations which had been non-functional for several years prior to takeover became economically viable within the next five years. However, even in this case we find that the CITU never tried to play up the contributions of these cooperatives to the working class movement.

**T**he same can be said of the worker cooperative in Sonali Tea Estate, Jalpaiguri, which was registered in September 1984 and happens to be the first worker tea cooperative in the country. The workers were with the AITUC and were encouraged by the district union. However, a few years after takeover, the cooperative started facing problems from the alleged former owners and the AITUC backed out. The workers are now fighting a case against those who claim to be the owners but their union has refused to back them. The Woka Tea Estate in Golaghat, Assam, is with the INTUC. This plantation was bought over by a larger cooperative of tea employees. At the time of takeover the plantation was almost closed and the cooperative was able to revive it at minimum costs within two years of the takeover. In this case too INTUC never tried to highlight its achievements.

Workers in the cooperatives formed in the Kamani enterprises (KTL

and KMA) belong to a single union, Kamani Employees Union, which is not affiliated to any trade union federation. The union has tried to encourage workers in other industrial units to replicate their endeavours but with little success as the federations to which these workers belong do not provide similar encouragement.

**T**he workers of Hes Watch Company took over its ownership in December 1995 after they got green signal from the BIFR. The union was led by the late Datta Samant, one of the few significant union leaders open to the idea of workers' takeover. After the company closed four years ago, this unit had around 350 workers who were unemployed. Samant presented Rs 2,500,000 which was given to him by supporters on his birthday as working capital for restarting the unit.

We therefore find that unions which are not with the national federations, such as Kamani Employees Union and Datta Samant's union, are more open to ideas of self-management. The larger trade union federations feel that worker cooperatives are of little importance to the working class movement. They may be tolerated but they are nothing to write home about.

The reluctance of trade unions in supporting worker takeovers arises from an ideological dilemma. One of the primary functions of trade unions is to defend workers against exploitation from capital. Hence trade unions function mainly as opposition groups. Once workers become the owners of capital, the conventional role of the trade union must change. What would be the role of trade unions as opponents of capital if workers themselves takeover capital?

There is no disputing the fact that the focus of trade unionism is the struggle between labour and capital. But does conventional trade unionism provide a radical framework for challenging the existing relations? Conventionally, trade unions defend workers rights in a number of ways such as fighting for security of employment, improvement in living and working conditions, increase in wages and so on. In addition, they also act



as pressure groups to change or modify existing policies of government which affect labour. However, in conducting these activities the actual domination of capital over labour is not challenged. Trade unions thus implicitly or explicitly accept the domination of capital over labour either by resignation or by forthright acceptance (depending on the ideology of the union).

The right-wing unions do not dispute this domination. The radical unions, especially those which swear by the supremacy of the working class over capital, resign themselves to this domination till the time is ripe for a social revolution. Thus when an industry becomes sick or is about to close down, trade unions start looking around for a new supplier of capital to save jobs. This could either be a new employer or through state takeover. The radical unions usually clamour for nationalisation despite the fact that most of them regard the state as pro-capitalist and anti-working class. Ironically, these unions feel that nationalisation of industry by an anti-working class government will protect workers from the onslaught of capitalism. It is only recently that some unions have started thinking about the fact that workers themselves are capable of turning around sick industries and saving jobs in the process.

**T**he process of globalisation through structural adjustment has adversely affected the working class throughout the world. Labour in most developing countries has suffered because restructuring of industry has invariably led to unemployment due to closure of 'unprofitable' industrial units. In order to facilitate this process, many countries (especially those in central and south America) have relaxed or removed legal protection to workers in the organised sector. The argument is that too much protection to workers in the organised sector has resulted in a small section of workers who are more privileged than the majority of the ill-paid workers. Thus, the World Bank report notes that 'In many Latin American, South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, labour laws establish oner-

ous job security regulations, rendering hiring decisions practically irreversible; and the system of worker representation and dispute resolution is often subject to unpredictable government decision-making, adding uncertainty to firms' estimates of future labour costs.' (WDR 1995: 34)

However, there is no evidence to show that by reducing these 'privileges', which were gained through concerted trade union action, conditions of workers in the unorganised sector will improve. This can be seen from the fate of casual and contract workers in the organised sector (see Davala 1992). Though these workers perform the same tasks as permanent workers, their wages are low and they have little security of employment. The sole aim of the employer in undertaking such measures is to increase profits by cutting labour costs.

**W**orkers in developed countries too face similar problems, though not as intensely as those in the developing countries. One estimate for the USA (Rothschild-Whitt 1983) shows that 66% of jobs were created by small and medium-scale establishments while the top 1,000 corporate houses provided less than 1% of the jobs. In Canada, only 40% of the jobs are in the organised sector.

In India, the Industrial Policy Statement of 1991 was in tune with the global process of structural adjustment. Two glaring features of the new policy are: an undermining of the public sector and a reduction of employment in the organised sector through voluntary retirement of workers. It is significant that one of the conditions for availing of income tax exemption for compensation paid to the worker under the Voluntary Retirement Scheme is that the retired worker's post must not be filled up in future. In other words, every instance of voluntary retirement reduces a permanent job. The Industrial Policy Statement contains a string of anti-public sector statements which barely fall short of abuse. It then proceeds to stress the need for reviving the economy through privatisation.

The government has started to dis-mantle public sector organisations through a number of strategies. Areas which were the exclusive monopoly of the public sector are being opened up to MNCs. These include key sectors such as banking, transport, telecommunications and power generation. Alongside, public sectors shares are being off-loaded in the market and foreign investment institutions have been allowed to purchase them.

**T**he trade unions have by and large opposed these policies. They have organised a few nation-wide strikes, *bandhs* and rallies in different parts of the country. All this has had little impact on the government. The only assurance the unions have from the government is that the proposed Exit Policy will not be implemented at present. This is of little value because even though winding up of large industrial units is not widely prevalent due to SICA and the BIFR, workers continue to lose their jobs through lay-offs and voluntary retirement.

The negligible impact of the national trade union federations in challenging the government's anti-labour policy clearly indicates that the conventional means of protest (rallies, *bandhs*, strikes) are ineffective. Hence the present situation demands that trade unions review their strategies. There is an urgent need to act more creatively to counteract or circumvent the adverse effects of the present policies of structural adjustment and globalisation on employment and production. The trade unions could, as a beginning, start worker cooperatives as promised in the industrial policy statement. Thanks to their indifference to this issue, the government has happily forgotten it. It should be forced into formulating concrete proposals for formation of worker cooperatives in order to save production and employment in some industries.

Apart from worker cooperatives, trade unions could also consider two other possibilities which have been tried out in other countries. These are worker shareholder cooperatives, which have been a success in the Quebec province of

Canada, and worker buyouts which have been tried out in Pakistan. Let us examine these options.

*Workers as shareholders:* Several public sector undertakings have been off-loading their shares in the market as a part of the privatisation policy and to raise capital. The government is also encouraging FIs to take part in the bidding. It is possible that in the future some of these institutions or a cartel of buyers could corner 26% of the shares of these undertakings. Under Company Law, convening a special meeting needs the support of 75% of the shareholders. If a group controls 26% of the shares it can prevent such a meeting and play a dominant role in reshaping the future of the company. In the case of a public sector undertaking this could mean weaning it away from its original goal of public commitment.

**A**t the same time several public sector undertakings and a few MNCs (e.g. Hindustan Levers) have offered shares to their employees at face value or at below market prices. These shares cannot be sold or transferred for three years in the case of public sector employees. Most public sector companies which have offered shares to employees have also arranged for loans or advances for their purchase. The objective of this scheme is unclear. Is it aimed at promoting greater involvement of the employees in work (viz. increasing labour productivity)? Or does it help provide more capital to the enterprise? It is, however, clear that intervention or participation of employees in the decision making process does not figure anywhere. It will be virtually impossible for individual employee shareholders to intervene in such matters. Hence workers will be content with increasing productivity to improve the company's profitability and subsequently their dividends and share value. This will assure good returns when they sell their shares after three years.

While trade unions in public sector undertakings have by and large opposed sale of shares in the market, they have remained indifferent to shareholding by employees. In fact, if properly planned,

this scheme could provide an effective means for worker intervention in the functioning of the enterprise and also prevent the dismantling of the public sector. This could happen only if, instead of individual worker shareholders, workers collectively hold shares by forming a cooperative or a trust. This body could hold the shares on behalf of the workers. The collective shares thus held would enable the workers to act as a block of shareholders and intervene in decisions which go against their interests. Union support is essential for such a scheme to take off as they alone can convince the workers of such decisions. So far only one union in the public sector – Bharat Electronics Employees Union (BEEU) at Bharat Electronics (BEL) Bangalore – has seriously tried to examine this option.

The BEEU is one of the two recognised negotiating unions at BEL. It has explored using the worker shareholders scheme as a form of workers intervention. Along with two other minor unions it has obtained a stay order from the Karnataka High Court on the sale of 20% of the company's shares in the market. While the market price of the share was Rs 160, the government fixed an absurdly low reserve price of Rs 30. The union has alongside petitioned that employees be allotted 26% of the shares to be held by a trust so that the employees could share in the profits, voting and so on. By holding shares as a block it would be possible for workers to elect one or more directors on the board. The employees could sell their shares to the trust at market rates on retirement or separation from the company. Thus the shares could be used for developing a permanent employee stake in the company and not for speculation.

**I**t is possible to persuade the government to agree to this proposal provided it has the backing of all the workers. In fact, the Karnataka government's Planning Board, on seeing the writ petition filed by the union in the High Court suggested that a similar proposal be made for the state public sector undertakings (Mathew 1995: 36). More recently, at the final hearing of the writ petition, the judge was

willing to give 26% shares to the workers but the offer could not be accepted. The main opposition to this scheme came from the other negotiating union which is affiliated to the CITU (the BEEU is affiliated to AITUC) and some of the other minority unions. These unions believe that the acceptance of such schemes is tantamount to endorsing the government's new industrial policy. Instead, all efforts should be directed to opposing the policy. The result of this opposition is quite evident. On the one side these trade unions have been totally ineffective in stalling the reforms and on the other individual employees have been buying shares offered to them by the company. These employees view the shares purely as an investment.

**T**he scheme of worker-shareholder cooperatives prevalent in the Quebec province of Canada has been a success. In 1993, there were around 50 such enterprises in the province in which the cooperatives held between 15-35% of the shares. Two of these cooperatives held majority shares. These cooperatives have the backing of one of the two major trade union federations in the province, the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU). One of the stated objectives of the union is to build workers' consciousness for worker takeover of industry. Shareholder cooperatives are viewed as instruments for this. As a block of shareholders, the workers elect their own directors to the board and have access to information about the company. The CNTU has set up a consultancy group comprising of specialists in finance, human resource development, marketing and business strategy. The cooperatives are thus able to get advice on various aspects of industry which equips them to participate effectively. This support from the union has made worker shareholding more meaningful.

*Worker Buyouts:* These are cases where workers as a group takeover a company by purchasing the majority of its shares. They are similar to worker cooperatives except that the workers do not form a cooperative to takeover the

company. This can be done by forming a society or through the trade union. In Canada and the USA there are cases of unions loaning money to their members to enable them to buy companies on the verge of closure. The more relevant case is that of Pakistan where this strategy has been used to takeover public sector companies when they were offered to the private sector.

**T**he plans for privatising public sector companies in Pakistan were initiated when the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) led by Benazir Bhutto was voted into power in 1989. Initially 14 units were identified for privatisation, but before any concrete measures could be taken the government collapsed. In 1990 the new Islami Jamoori Ittehad (IJI) government led by Nawaz Sharif adopted a more aggressive policy of privatisation. In 1991 it set up the Privatisation Commission with a federal minister as chairperson. This commission was to identify public sector units which could be sold to the private sector. Within a short span of time (i.e. before this government was ousted) the commission sold 69 state-owned units. The commission invited sealed bids for buying government-held shares in the company. The highest bidder was sold the block of shares. What is more significant is that the units were profit-making enterprises. Though governments have changed thrice since 1989, the policy on privatisation has continued unabated. This perhaps indicates that there is no basic difference in the approach of the two major political parties as far as workers' rights are concerned. It is estimated that around 60,000 workers in these public sector companies have lost their jobs after their units were privatised.

The trade unions, on the other hand, have shown a remarkable sense of unity on this issue, unsupported by most of the major political parties in the country. The big trade unions in the country, irrespective of their political ideologies, came together to form the Joint Labour Front (JLF) to oppose the government's anti-labour policies. Though the JLF has not succeeded in slowing down the govern-

ment's privatisation strategy, it has been able to modify existing laws to enable worker buyouts of public sector companies. This was possible because it adopted a pragmatic policy of using privatisation for worker takeovers instead of a blind anti-privatisation approach. The government has started the Employees' Share Option Plan as a response to the trade unions' demands. Under this plan the workers of a public sector company can bid for government held shares, provided they act as a group and are the highest bidder. Second, the employees can use their provident and gratuity funds as guarantees for securing loans for purchasing shares. The obvious disadvantage is that the workers' group has to be the highest bidder. The law has been amended to allow the workers an opportunity to bid higher than the highest bid received through sealed tenders.

**A** few public sector companies have been bought over by their workers. The more significant ones are Millat Tractors and Sindh Alkalies. Most of the companies have fared well after takeover. There has been greater involvement of workers and managers in increasing production. For example Millat Tractors, which manufactures Massey Ferguson tractors, was producing well below its capacity prior to takeover. It had produced only 2,000 tractors in seven months and had incurred losses of over (Pakistani) Rs 4 crores. Within four months of the takeover, production increased to 4,700 tractors and the past losses were wiped out. The company has diversified its production to other items such as power generators, lift trucks, prime movers and combine harvesters. It has also been instrumental in promoting another takeover by collaborating with the employees of Bolan Castings to buy 51% of the shares.

Sindh Alkalies has shown similar improvement. The company increased its profits by 67% within four years of takeover. Its share value rose by 100% within two years of takeover. The company's main problem is excess labour. Instead of resorting to traditional practices such as voluntary retirement or lay-offs, its board

of directors decided to expand production by 50% so as to absorb the surplus labour.

The main advantage the new management enjoys is of autonomy in decision-making. Decisions can be taken and implemented by the board (which comprises elected workers and managers). Earlier, decisions needed the concurrence of various ministries before implementation. Moreover, the objectives of these companies are different from those in the public or private sectors. The public sector companies are weighed down by excessive bureaucratisation while the private companies operate solely on the profit motive. Therefore, there have been massive lay-offs (sometimes as high as 50% of the labour force) after privatisation. In case of worker buyouts the objective is mainly to increase production through greater involvement of the workers and to protect employment.

The most positive aspect of employee buyouts in Pakistan is the support from the trade union movement. While opposing the government's privatisation policy, the unions have explored other positive alternatives. This strategy needs highlighting because while it is important to defend the role of the public sector in developing countries, it is equally important to protect employment and production. Moreover, since buyouts have been initiated by the employees with no financial assistance or subsidy from the government, the enterprises have to depend on employee commitment for their survival and expansion. This has, in a way, helped them to become more independent and aggressively competitive with the private sector.

**S**o far we have tried to build up a case for worker takeovers based on existing information. The success or failure of these organisations depends largely on their ability to function in a democratic manner. In other words, they can succeed only if they encourage workers to participate in the decision-making process. Apart from securing economic benefits for its members, a cooperative or any collectivist organisation is expected to inculcate a sense of participation by build-

ing up democratic institutions of equal partners. The Commission on Cooperative Principles notes that a cooperative '...exists in order to place the common people in effective control of the mechanism of modern economic life... it must give the individual, only too often reduced to the rôle of a cog in that machine, a chance to express himself, a voice in the affairs and destinies of his cooperative and scope to exercise his own judgement.' (NCUI 1969: 20)

Democratic control cannot be restricted to merely exercising one's franchise during elections. It has to be a continuous process wherein all members are encouraged to participate in the organisations's activities. The social implications of this process could be far reaching as it will build confidence among participants. Workers in India have been excluded from the decision-making process because of the belief that they are incapable of deciding what is good for themselves.

In the case of worker takeovers the problem is not so much of appropriation of power by the collective of workers as this is done soon after the takeover, but of retaining power within the collective. If the organisational structure is not radically altered to permit democratic control, there is every possibility of bureaucratic tendencies developing within these institutions. These organisations must therefore evolve their own structures which are conducive to democratic control and decentralised decision-making.

Most of the cases discussed have tried to evolve their own structures for encouraging participation. The worker cooperatives in tea in Tripura and the one in West Bengal rely heavily on collective decision-making through their respective general bodies (Bhowmik 1992). The same is true of some of the more successful cooperatives in Calcutta (Bhowmik 1993). In the worker shareholders' cooperatives in Quebec, all decisions regarding voting in the company's general body and election of worker directors are decided by the general body of the cooperative. The two cases in Pakistan have also

relied on workers' participation for their success. Sindh Alkalies has set up an internal management board comprising workers and managerial staff in equal number. This board meets once a month to take stock of the situation. The worker members are expected to place suggestions of the general workers on the management of the company. The board also sets the agenda for the board of directors (here too workers have 50% representation). Millat Tractors has set up similar forums to enable workers to express their views.

Another important aspect of these ventures is that they are supported by their trade unions. This is important for the future growth of this sector. In Pakistan the trade unions have decided that worker buyouts will be encouraged wherever possible. In India, on the other hand, where there are greater instances of successful takeovers, the major national trade unions have not considered such possibilities. This could affect the future growth of this sector. How long will it take for our trade unions to realise that relying solely on conventional means of protest (strikes, bandhs, demonstrations) is not sufficient to protect the interests of labour in the current situation? Only time will tell, but one hopes that it will not be too late by then.

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# Comment:

## Looking to the future

TIMES are fast changing. Obviously, trade unions and trade union tactics must also change with the time. As the biggest mass and class organisations in modern society, they reflect changing society. If they do not, they will be out of tune and become moribund. The need is to understand these changes and to realise that trade unions cannot remain rooted in the past. At the same time it is necessary to remember that some aspects must basically remain unchanged.

While it is true that the working class has been undergoing a transformation, with the onset of the scientific and technological revolution the change in its composition has become quite rapid. This transformation is reflected in:

- \* Changing proportion of the service industry to the manufacturing industry. A growing proportion of workers are finding employment in the service sector.

- \* Growing proportion of skilled workers, technicians and engineers in the total number of workers employed, with the upgradation of technology in several spheres.

- \* At the other pole, a mass of unskilled workers and contract labour doing manual work, outside the regular muster-roll of establishments and with no job security.

- \* Replacement of permanent regular workers by workers on contract, of full-time workers by part-time ones, of establishment-based workers by home-based workers, and so on. Certain organised sections are being forced into the ranks of the unorganised.

- \* Higher educational level of workers in industry, even though nearly half the population is as yet illiterate.

- \* Increasing number of women in different spheres of economic activity, apart from agriculture and personalised or domestic services.

- \* Greater mobility resulting in a more heterogeneous mix of workers in most regions and sectors.

These are a few aspects which show that today's average worker is not the same as his pre-freedom or even the early post-freedom forebears. The job profile is undergoing a change.

The composition of the Indian working class, not to speak of the working class in developed countries, has changed. But what has to be noted is that though the working class has changed, its essence has remained unaltered.

There are those who would like us to believe that as a result of the changes, the working class as such has ceased to exist; that the class struggle has also ceased. Evidently such people would like to see the working class vanish, or rather dissolve into a vague petty bourgeois mass, motivated

by nothing more than careerism, the desire for personal aggrandisement and such like philistine thoughts. But every day the working class is giving a lie to such beliefs and statements. The recent strike in France by over a million workers was a demonstration of working class and trade union power.

Here in India, workers and their trade unions have repeatedly resorted to actions, including industrial strikes, *bandhs* and other militant forms of struggle against the government's anti-people and anti-national policies, especially during the last decade, under the banner of the Sponsoring Committee of trade unions and local Joint Action Committees of trade unions.

Taking class initiative, the workers' organisations have further joined together with their allies – the *kisans*, agricultural labour, and even student, youth and women's organisations. They have come together on the common platform of the National Platform of Mass Organisations to resist government policies dictated by the IMF, World Bank and the WTO, which are meant to subserve the interests of MNCs and of the developed capitalist countries. These growing features of the trade union movement are likely to be carried forward.

Overall, the working class has broadened in scope and the trade union movement has become broader in sweep, embracing white-collar employees, officers and engineers, who are increasingly adopting the style of organisation and tactics of struggle which were earlier specific to the blue-collar factory workers. This can only be explained as a phenomenon of continuous co-option of these sections into the working class and of being influenced by working class thought and ideology.

At the same time, their co-option into the class and induction into the movement introduces certain influences of petty bourgeois opportunism, fleeting mood swings from left militancy to stupid inactivity and avoidance of struggle, and of consumerism as distinguished from a genuine rise in general living standards.

The mass of working people, especially the youth, have today become more conscious of their rights, and are no longer in a mood willingly to suffer the iniquities of unemployment and the 'values' of capitalism. The bourgeois propaganda machine is grinding overtime to deflect the youth into 'careerism' and personal aggrandisement, away from social issues and struggles. The struggle of ideologies is thus becoming sharper and of immediate relevance within the TU movement.



There is a lot of inspired discussion about declining membership of trade unions, especially in the developed capitalist countries. This can only be regarded as a temporary phenomenon, arising from the attacks mounted on the working class in the wake of the WTO, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has encouraged imperialism and given an impression that it has a 'free' and 'open' field to operate. Trade unions are regrouping, moving to recapture lost ground and forge ahead. The coming days will witness a revival of trade union activity and strength. As the primary organisation of the class and as schools of class struggle, TUs will increasingly play a role in society.

However, there has to be a shift of emphasis in trade union organisation in keeping with the changing situation. The factory-based workers and the communication and infrastructural workers will remain the leading force. Yet the spread of activity has to somewhat shift to the mass of unorganised workers, part-time workers, home-based workers, women workers, agricultural labour and workers in informal sectors. Concentrating on the existing unions of organised workers is not enough. To consolidate the workers as a class, it is necessary to bring the unorganised workers into the trade union fold.

This requires changes in the style of functioning of trade unions. While old methods, such as gate meetings at factories or offices, may not have lost their validity and usefulness, new methods of contact and communication with the workers have to be found. Similarly, the importance of trade union education and propaganda – considering the higher educational level of workers, the complexity of the new challenges that are posed today and the prevalence of new methods of communication such as the electronic media, need to be taken into account. Trade unions must also be the interface and promote interaction of urban and rural workers so as to help organise the vast mass of rural workers and draw them into common action.

The policy of neo-liberalism, of structural adjustment imposed on developing countries through the instrumentality of the IMF, World Bank and the WTO, the operation of international finance capital crossing international borders as 'footloose hot money', the aggression of the MNCs in every sector of the economy has actually 'globalised' trade union work and brought up the necessity of international class struggle. The fact that the ruling party in our country is pursuing 'globalisation' as a tactic, though it will only make the Indian bourgeoisie a junior collaborator of the developed capitalist system, requires that trade unions too should act 'globally'. MNCs have to be confronted 'globally' through effective international trade union action and solidarity.

The struggle for the 'nation' – its security, independence, integrity, development with social justice, is now on the agenda and the working class and the toiling masses have a decisive role to play in this struggle. The identification of the working people with the 'nation' is becoming clearer.

The fact of 'growth without jobs' or 'growth without development' – a characteristic of capitalism, calls for bitter resistance from the trade union movement. In this sense the class contradictions, nationally and internationally, are becoming sharper. Trade unions in developing countries have to work and fight together on issues commonly affecting them. Thus the Indian trade union centres have to establish close links with trade union centres in the S. Asia region, in Asia, in the group of developing countries, and of course globally. A certain degree of revitalisation and reorganisation of existing international trade union organisations and of international trade union relations through them, is therefore on the cards.

There is a school of thought which holds that to talk about classes and class struggle, about imperialism and socialism, about the leading role of the working class and so on, is to talk in jargon, is to be 'dogmatic', even 'conservative' and 'orthodox' if you will. Such people would like to avoid the truth and bury their heads in the sand like ostriches. But social reality does not cease to exist just because we refuse to talk about it.

'Liberalisation', 'globalisation' and 'privatisation', the three watchwords of the 'new economic policy', are leading to calls for 'flexible labour laws'. MNCs, like predatory man eaters are demanding such industrial and labour laws as would suit their hunt for super-profits. Trade union resistance against these attempts to undermine labour laws, which give certain amount of protection to workers, need to be stepped up.

At the same time, trade unions must enter the 21st century by fighting for national labour standards. This will require the elimination of child labour, sending children back to school, ending of discrimination against women workers, establishing and enforcing a national minimum wage, ensuring social security, and so on.

All this calls for a unification of the trade union movement in our country. The stage of joint actions, common actions is no longer enough. If trade unions are to meet the challenges of the 21st century, what is essential is the organisational unification of trade unions, at present divided along political or even craft lines. It would not mean the abjuring of politics by trade unions, for that can never be. But it would most certainly mean independence of the trade unions from the grip of any particular political party. To begin with, let the left-oriented trade unions come together. The stage would then be set for an all-embracing unity, which would mean one central trade union organisation, one industrial federation at the national or state level and one union in one establishment. This may appear a far cry today, but that has to be the sort of trade union that we want in the year 2000. The dialogue to bring this about has to start here and now.

A B BARDHAN

# Books

**FOOTLOOSE LABOUR: Working in India's Informal Economy** by Jan Breman. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

FOOTLOOSE Labour appears at an opportune time. It coincides with, in many ways the latest statistical findings that wage work has become the dominant mode of social existence and wage workers have become the largest social group in India. Paradoxically, it is also a period when labour is perhaps the lowest priority of policy-makers and planners, busy as they are in boosting the share market and seducing foreign investment.

The subject of Breman's latest work is the lower echelons of labour in the in the so-called informal or unregulated sector of the economy in south Gujarat. In this work he brings together his research findings of the last thirty years. Many of the themes that Breman takes up in this book would be familiar to those who have kept pace with his prolific research output on the lives of the agrarian and non-agrarian workers.

This book deals with some familiar figures – the halpati landless labourers whom he studied in the 1960s and again in the mid-1980s, the cane harvesting migrants and the circulatory migrants in the rural areas who were the subject of his research in the mid-1980s, as also the brickmakers, stone quarry workers and road and construction gangs who made brief appearances in his earlier work. The important new additions are the vast number of powerloom weavers, diamond cutters, *jari* workers and dyeing and printing industry workers of Surat, whose phenomenal growth occurred much after Breman began his research career in Gujarat. The significance of the book lies in that the vast army of wage hunters and gatherers appear together for the first time in the labouring landscape of south Gujarat. They share several similar features but also some interesting differences in the way they are recruited, herded into places of work, their work organised and controlled and then returned back to their homes within and beyond the region.

Three themes structure Jan Breman's latest work. First, a thorough critique of the informal sector concept. Second, the geographical vantage point of his work in the economically dynamic region of south Gujarat, and finally the persistence of the dialectic of immobility and mobility. These three themes provide the possibility of examining Breman's work over time and to locate his latest work in the trajectory of his intellectual concerns.

The concept of informal sector has enjoyed wide currency in development literature and among policy-planners since its introduction in the early 1970s. The structural crisis engulfing developing countries during that period had dimmed hopes of rapid absorption of the burgeoning population in gainful wage employment through strategies of rapid industrialisation. Attention shifted to the arena of the urban economy where a considerable section of the population was assumed to have found a niche outside the pale of organised wage existence. The strategy of survival, characteristic of this section, was then elevated into desirable policy goals – self employment rather than wage dependency. Rural migrants were expected to use the informal economy to gain useful skills, ultimately propelling themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs.

Considerable evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, the concept of informal sector has enjoyed renewed salience in the current globalised and liberalised economic setting and is avidly endorsed by the World Bank. Now it is flexible labour market arrangements, a euphemism for the blatant hire and fire policy practiced by the informal sector employers, and peddled as desirable policy goals for rapid economic development.

Breman has been an early and consistent critic of the analytical content of the concept of informal sector. Breman had raised serious objections to the usefulness of the concept. First, the informal sector had been solely identified with the urban economy, neglecting the rural milieu altogether where a considerable and growing amount of non-agrarian employment was undertaken. Second, the pattern of linkages between the rural and urban economy is usually understood in terms of a one-off migration of labour from the country to the town, which seriously neglects the impact of seasonal and circular migration both between and within rural and urban sectors. Third, the concept of informal economy binds together heterogeneous economic forms and working arrangements and blurs the sharp lines of class differences within the non-agrarian economic order. Finally, self-employment is no longer, if it ever was, the primary mode of work in the informal economy; both the rural and urban segments of the informal economy are marked by pervasive wage dependence of the bulk of the population.

In Breman's account, the informal economy still retains its use as a description of a spectrum of labour arrangements of the unregulated and by far the predominant portion of the firmly entrenched and integrated capitalist

economic order in India. It is a landscape in which capital is unrestrained and labour footloose and disenfranchised.

Those familiar with Breman's prolific output since 1974 when his first major work, a monograph on the attached agricultural labour system of *halipratha* appeared (*Patronage and Exploitation*, University of California Press, 1974) would recognise the landscape of south Gujarat. His enquiry into the condition of labour in the so-called informal sector begins with a re-survey of employment patterns among the *halpati* landless of Gandevisaon and Chikhligaon, the site of his original research in the early 1960s.

From this vantage point Breman charts out the transformation in the agrarian labour scene in the last three decades – for instance the massive increase of non-agrarian employment among the traditional agricultural labour castes alongside the decline of agrarian employment. Within agriculture itself, casual and day labour employment had outstripped the formerly dominant form of year-round employment of farm hands. A bulk of the non-agrarian work was in casual employment without any regularity or security of work and a substantial number of *halpati* labourers were seasonal migrants to distant destinations. Declining *halpati* participation in agriculture and their regular exodus outside the region, however, was not due to agrarian stagnation in the countryside or shrinkage of employment in the cities of the region. In fact, precisely the opposite – prosperous capitalist farming and a huge expansion of sugarcane farming (which had increased five-fold in the intervening three decades) in the countryside was matched by a boom in the urban industrial sector.

The paradox of agrarian expansion and industrial growth alongside marginalisation of local labour necessitated a major shift in the geographical locus of Breman's research in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. By deliberately abandoning the safe haven of the village study, so popular with his contemporaries, and by focusing instead on the wider region of south Gujarat, Breman was able to chart out the rapid capitalist transformation in the countryside marked by the rise to dominance of the Patidar capitalist farmers who had effectively completed the conquest of the region by the late 1970s. The shift to a regional perspective allowed Breman to discover and explain a significant feature in the agrarian labour landscape dominated by capitalist labour relations, namely that of intra-rural labour circulation and thus the phenomenon of simultaneous exclusion of local labour from the expanding agrarian economy and their replacement by labourers from outside the region.

Breman's second important monograph (*Peasants, Paupers and Migrants: rural labour circulation and capitalist production in West India*, OUP, New Delhi, 1985) provides a historical explanation for the accelerated economic transformation of agriculture and the ruthless predatory nature of the capitalist labour regime in the region. The apparent paradox of simultaneous influx and exodus of labour in the region was necessitated not so much as by

shortage of labour but rather in order to create a surplus of cheap and controllable labour. Circulation, rather than permanent migration, was shown as a desperate defensive strategy of the immiserised labour to retain a foothold in the region.

In a short methodological essay published some years later, Breman pointed out that the concept of the region was not reducible to a mere spatial unit midway between a macro and micro setting (meso-regional perspectives had acquired a short-lived currency among sociologists in the early 1970s). Region was not dead space, but was animated by power and movement. Breman identified these two elements as respectively marking the polar positions of the dominant land owning patidar class and the massive army of the labouring underclass rendered mobile on an unprecedented scale.

In the present study, Breman extends his notion of the region to include the non-agrarian sector which has witnessed explosive growth, mainly in the last two decades. Surat experienced a tripling of population in the last 25 years. Most of this increase was due to labour migration from far beyond the hinterland of the city, mainly to service the rapid growth of industrial activity in the powerloom, diamond cutting and printing and dyeing industry. Breman calculates that no less than 70% of the million strong work-force in the city is involved in the so-called informal economy. The expansion of the non-agrarian economy is not limited to the urban centres of the region alone but has penetrated deep into the rural hinterland in myriad small and large establishments, both permanent and seasonal, which employ large numbers of migrant workers.

The character of the labour regime in the non-agrarian sector is fundamentally similar to that of the agrarian economy of the region; both are marked by extreme subordination of labour to capital, exclusion of local labour and huge inflow of labour from outside the region. Informalisation and casualisation of labour in both the sectors have blurred the distinction between a rural and urban economic order and cohered the south Gujarat regional labour landscape further. Continuous fieldwork in the region for the last thirty years has placed Breman in a unique position to chart out the comprehensive social transformation which has ended the agrarian proletariat's firm embeddedness in the local economy.

The labour landscape in the region is in a state of continuous flux. Breman's evocative phrases 'labour nomadism' and 'wage hunting and gathering' capture the ebb and flow of labourers as they move ceaselessly between town and country and even within them, into and out of the region, between employers and, for those at the very bottom of the labour hierarchy, between a bewildering variety of occupations. This apparently chaotic movement has fascinated Breman and has been a consistent theme of enquiry since the late 1970s.

In a set of essays published between 1978 and 1988, he subjected the massive influx of cane harvesters into south Gujarat to special attention. He emphasised the flip side of

the phenomena of labour mobility – i.e. their necessary immobilisation for the duration of work. Immobilisation was effected through a combination of economic and extra-economic institutions, ranging from physical coercion to debt bondage and the ubiquitous presence of labour brokers of various kinds. In the present study, Breman finds institutions of temporary immobilisation of labour to be pervasive in the modern non-agrarian informal economy. Labour brokers flourish in all manners of seasonal industrial activity as do various forms of bondage effected through cash advances. Hours of work are inordinately long, use of technology minimal and piece-rate remains the main form of wage payment. It is this dialectic of mobility and immobility in the informal economy which prompts Breman to draw a parallel between the informal sector labourer of today with a figure from the colonial past – the *coolie*.

Coolie – a term connoting general unskilled labour today – had a specific meaning during the colonial period and referred to the indentured contract labourer working in plantations and mines, both within the country and in overseas plantation colonies in West Indies, Mauritius, Fiji, Ceylon and South Africa. Vast numbers of such workers were mobilised through a host of labour intermediaries – *sirdars*, *mistries* and *kanganies* – and transported across long distances to work for a specific term at a fixed wage under an employer. What marked out the coolie was that in most instances he was legally bound to perform contractually specific work and was punished for breach of contract by imprisonment. This legal unfreedom was compounded by the virtually limitless power the employer to restrain and punish the coolie. The indentured labour regime, though confined to the extractive and plantation sectors of the colonial economy, provided a model of labour arrangements that had a wider and insidious impact on a variety of modern forms of employment of migrant labour in the colonial economy, and as Breman shows, even in the post-colonial period.

Breman's acquaintance with colonial coolie labour had been mainly through his research into the plantation system in the Dutch colony of Sumatra in the 19th century. This resulted in a monograph on the condition of labour on the Deli tobacco plantation. Breman strongly indicted the plantation labour regime for the systematic violence perpetrated on the Javanese and Chinese indentured workers. Degradation of indentured workers in the labour process had resulted in excessive mortality and sickness among them. Dehumanised depiction of the coolies as dangerous and animal-like had justified an irrational and excessive use of personal and systemic violence on them. Among other materials, Breman also published a suppressed report by a Dutch official at the turn of the century revealing shocking treatment of plantation labourers by their Dutch owners (*Taming the Coolie Beast*). In 1985, when it was first published in Dutch, the book created a splash in the normally placid Dutch academic waters as it effectively shattered a

complacent national belief about benign Dutch colonial policy at the turn of the century. It also resulted in a vigorous academic controversy in which sophisticated revisionist attempts were made to refute Breman's thesis by painting the coolie labour system as a rational free market institution which benefitted both planters and labourers alike. Immobilisation, incident to coolie status, was explained away as voluntarily entered into in exchange for security of employment.

Breman's study of the Hali system in Gujarat and the colonial coolie labour regimes has deeply influenced his present research project. It has made him acutely sensitive to the aspects of unfreedom masked by apparently voluntary and rational free market institutions. But Breman's description and analysis of the forms of employment and institutions of labour in the informal sector is sufficiently nuanced and complex to note the sharp changes that have occurred in these institutions with the rapid transformation of the labouring landscape. He notes the absolute and irreversible decline in the Hali system. Contemporary forms of labour bondage, though similar in some ways to the old system, perform very different functions and are oriented towards a different economic order. They serve not just to immobilise labour but also to unhinge and mobilise it from its moorings in the subsistence economy. *Muqaddams* and labour brokers are necessary not only to supply and ensure performance of labour but also to disperse the labourers, viz. at the end of the brick-making or cane harvesting season. These labour institutions create particular types of immobility and mobility in consonance with the cyclical and spasmodic nature of production rhythms in the informal capitalist enterprises – in other words, they are instrumental in keeping labour footloose at the bottom of the informal economy.

A great merit of the book lies in the way in which Breman has presented an integrated picture of the regional landscape of labour, knitting together agrarian and non-agrarian components both in the rural and urban milieu and demonstrating the articulation of several streams of labour flows and institutional arrangements. I am, however, uncomfortable with a few analytical formulations and shall refer to some thematic lacunae which would have improved the analytical rigour of the book. First, there is surprisingly little discussion on the flows of capital between rural and urban, agrarian and non-agrarian sectors of the regional economy – for instance the extent to which patidar agrarian capitalists were involved in the urban informal enterprises and the consequences this had on management styles and labour institutions and labour flows. Similarly, the extent to which urban capitalists are involved in rural informal enterprises. Flows of capital from outside the region too are scarcely discussed.

The major consequence is that processes of capital accumulation do not seem to impinge analytically in the structuring of the labour landscape which Breman has

presented so well. It sometimes leads to awkward formulations about the nature of the capitalist dynamic while explaining the persistence of low level of technology linked to prevalence of sub-contracting in the informal economy and consequent high degree of labour exploitation. Breman attributes this to the 'essentially mercantilist nature of capital accumulation process' (p. 159) where industrial capital is subordinated to merchant capital. Given that a tendency towards sub-contracting is general in the most advanced forms of industry and given that the deregulation and deformalisation of labour relations has infiltrated even the highly formalised sectors of the economy, this formulation scarcely explains the labour arrangements in the typically agrarian capitalist enterprises like sugar cooperatives. The problem with such a characterisation is that labour relations and institutions in the informal economy would appear as historical and eternal and lacking in an internal dynamic of their own, precisely the point which Breman assiduously distances himself from.

The book is strongly biased towards structural descriptions about work processes in the informal economy. Painstakingly detailed about institutions, arrangements and processes and flows of labour, the book is nevertheless peppered with observations of an individual nature and pithy humor and travails of everyday life of the workers which suddenly illumine and animate the book. Like the curious story of two brothers who rarely see each other as they commute every day from their village to work on alternate shifts or the anonymous labourer who had written on the wall in a casual labour market, 'Labourers wanted; men Rs 25, women Rs 15', in a desperate bid to prevent his fellow workers from accepting lower wages by closing ranks.

It is only in the final chapter of the book that Breman tries to systematically deal with the question of consciousness, resistance and lifestyles of the informal sector workers. But, despite several interesting insights, this is the least developed part of his work and suffers from being weakly integrated with rest of the book. It is also at points contrary to the dominant tenor of the work which details the structural dependency of working lives in great and passionate detail. However his discussion throws up many important but as yet inadequately explored lines of enquiry which need to be taken up in future research on informal sector workers. These include issues of resistance in its various forms, collective and individual, open and fugitive; forms of bargaining without established and formalised rules by individuals and collectives; family, neighbourhood and workplaces as sites of resistance. Issues of identity formation and conflicts and solidarity arising from them, gender relations and the impact of increased participation of women in the labour force within the family are some other areas for further enquiry.

An irreversible weakening of vertical ties of dependence, increased horizontal orientation and refusal by the poorest workers to bestow legitimacy to the idea of inequal-

ity are the most significant of his research findings in Gujarat over the last thirty years. Footloose labourers, in their stubborn refusal to be tied to particular employers, expressed strongly in peripatetic existence and in their desire for autonomy, display a distinct proletarian lifestyle and consciousness. The ways in which this is imprinted on the larger social landscape remains to be explored.

Prabhu Mahapatra

**THE POLITICS OF LABOUR UNDER LATE COLONIALISM: Workers, Unions and the State – Chota Nagpur 1928-1939** by Dilip Simeon. Manohar, Delhi, 1995.

It is indeed ironic that in these times of neo-liberal economic orthodoxy with its accent on the disciplining of labour, particularly the industrial workforce, we may once again be witnessing an emergence of labour studies. Even in the hey-days of our flirtations with Marxism/socialism, in both their political and academic variations, labour studies as a discipline never quite developed firm roots. All this notwithstanding the heroic labours of the late A.R. Desai, whose monumental 18 (or was it 19) volume documentation of the Indian industrial labour force lay unclaimed and unread in the dusty offices of the Indian Council of Historical Research.

Of course, there were the regular outpourings of the CPI theoreticians and the quasi managerial writings of E.A. Ramaswamy. The Emergency years witnessed the setting up of the National Labour Institute, but its forte lay in the studies of agrarian bonded labour. There were of course the exceptions – Chitra Joshi's doctoral work on the Kanpur textile workers which proved invaluable to Ganesh Pandey and his comrades when they attempted to re-group after the Swadeshi Mill massacre of 1977. Nirmal Sengupta's work on Jharkhand and later Bokaro did much to sensitize us about the destruction and destitution that accompanies industrialisation, particularly in backward, tribal pockets. Sandeep Pendse's prescient writings on the Datta Samant phenomenon helped contextualise the last desperate struggle of the Bombay Textile workers and their eventual disarticulation – all so poignantly captured in Rajni Baxi's documentation of the strike. Dipesh Chakravorty's *Rethinking Working Class History* buried effectively our naive notions of proletarian consciousness, so much a subject of heated debate after the Bhiwandi riots. And above all, the ISS Hague-Public Enterprises Center for Continuing Education's mega-project, Trade unions and the labouring poor in India, which used a wide range of methodologies and mediums in an effort to capture the complexity of our labour scene.

Yet, one probably would not be far off the mark in asserting that nothing comparable to E.P. Thompson's classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, ever got



produced through our different labours. Probably the old work by Morris D. Morris – *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India*, still remains the most quoted book in the discipline.

Dilip Simeon's monograph is a welcome addition to this otherwise deficient corpus of literature. And notwithstanding the periodisation of the study, its relevance for today is undiminished. After all, industrialists like the Tatas, who are at one level pro-liberalisation, continue to be worried about foreign competition. And their pitch to the Indian state for a level playing field and protecting Indian capital is strongly reminiscent of their appeals to and deals with the Indian National Congress during the colonial era. True that their workforce is today not as agitated as it was during 1928-39, when the Chota Nagpur belt witnessed major strikes and a labour upsurge. In fact, the Tatas take great pride in seeing themselves as model employers and responsible capitalists. Yet, for any prescient observer willing to get under the surface of the ostensible calm of Jamshedpur, the situation for the contract workers, those in the informal sector, and the tribals, is not very different from what it was 60 years back.

Simeon's history of the labour movement in Chota Nagpur brings to life the social impact of industrialisation and the process of primitive accumulation of capital. In this Ruhr of India, Simeon examines the real-life conditions and the complexities of the contest between labour and management, both in the 'modern' metallurgical industries around Jamshedpur and the 'primitive' coalfields of Jharia. What we thus have is a range of technologies, work situations, a variation in the size and cultural demography of the workforce, patterns of recruitment and migration, and management practices – all of which are factored in to understand the ups and downs of the labour upsurge in the crucial decade from the onset of the Depression to the beginning of World War II.

The narrative starts from the famous 1928 strike in TISCO – the emergence of the 'independent' union leader Maneck Homi, the interventions of Subhash Bose and the Congress led Jamshedpur Labour Association and the conflict between the unions, with fascinating roles being played by the Tatas, the colonial state and the Congress leadership. The 1929 Golmuri Tinplate strike highlights the tension between workers demands for better working conditions and the efforts to subsume them within the larger national struggle. Much of this may well read like any contemporary situation – with deals between leaders of diametrically opposing persuasions, bribes and pay-offs and the use of threats and violence. The situation in the 'primitive' coalfields comes across as no different, except that we have the feudatory Raja of Seraikela who collaborates with the TISCO management (they used the coalfields as a captive resource) to crush the union leadership.

Later in the thirties, the labour movement was in retreat – with Homi in jail, Bose having lost interest and the

management on the upswing. Nevertheless, the workers continued to struggle, both against the onslaughts of retrenchment and political victimisation and for the release of their leaders. The final chapters of the book deal with the situation dramatically altered by the elections of 1937 – the Congress party setting up a Commission of Enquiry into working conditions, the first attempts to bring some 'rationality' into labour management relations, and of course the efforts by different forces to 'control and subjugate labour' while trying to appeal to them.

The above is a rather schematic sketch of this otherwise 'rich' account. No one, the Tatas and other managements, the union leaders, the nationalist leadership, or the colonial state emerge unscathed from Simeon's pen. The role of the Tatas as 'model' employers, in particular, make for a fascinating though murky reading. Their handling of the contract workforce, particularly the tribals, the attempts to control militancy by taking the battle from the workplace to the residential site (a situation in all company towns) provides the early glimpses of what over the next five decades became a finely honed policy of carrot and stick, divide and rule.

So too with the varieties of labour leaderships – be they independent, Congress or Communist. Simeon's analysis of the politics of mediation and what goes into making a successful leader could well be used in trade union study circles today. Of course, the institutes of labour management are unlikely to be pleased with his accent on the subjectivity of labour and how the working class uses a variety of strategies – from withdrawal and work-shirking to militant strikes and *gheraos* to retain some semblance of autonomy. This notwithstanding regular betrayals by the leadership and an overall situation defined by forces out of their control. One can easily see how a good leadership needs to learn to bide its time; that militancy alone is no answer to the onslaughts of capital. This is a lesson that the late Datta Samant could well have used with greater effect in his 1982 textile strike.

Today, when many believe that the tide has turned firmly against labour and when days lost due to lockouts far exceed those lost by strikes, it is important not to get caught in a defeatist trap. Simeon's work demonstrates that in those turbulent years of highs and lows, what we had was a working class in the process of its making, drawing upon and working through its diverse identities, always attempting in constrained circumstances to transform itself and their conditions. Possibly, Simeon is too biased towards teasing out labour autonomy to provide an 'objective' account (just contrast his work with that of Vinay Bahl who covers the same period and episodes in her book *The Making of the Indian Working Class: The Case of the Tata Iron and Steel Company*). But if the working class, its leadership and ideologues, lose the battle in their minds, actual defeat is not far off. And that would indeed be a pity, for the battle for democratising the workplace and not instrumentalising

labour as only a factor of production needs to be fought continuously.

Harsh Sethi

**THE KEYNESIAN FALLOUT** by Narindar Singh. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1996.

THIS challenging book mounts a well prepared assault on mainline economics, which, the author says, is 'against life'. In producing illusions such as growth, choice, welfare and prosperity, it only serves to legitimise the ruthless military-industrial civilisation. The author begins his polemic with a novel critique of the supposedly revolutionary economics of John Maynard Keynes, which continues to be influential in much of the world.

Keynesian economics revolves around the entity called effective demand. But, it is completely unconcerned with the composition of this demand. 'Orgiastic consumption, orgiastic military spending and orgiastic investment in life-threatening industries would all be welcome if only they could raise effective demand to a level high enough to ensure what is known as full employment.' Thus while Keynes' problematic was no more than *cyclical unemployment*, or the management of the system, ours should really be the chronic *misemployment* of resources and labour, which brings into question the very credentials of the system. Narindar Singh warns us that 'if not stemmed in time, the Keynes-oriented pursuits of the military industrialism, now rampant in the world, cannot but spell an inexorable paralysis of our habitat and therefore the extinction of our species too.'

The link of Keynesian economics with militarism or 'Hitlerism' is not just indirect. For even as Keynes was advocating public spending as a solution to unemployment, Hitler had already started on a programme of 'public works' including preparations for war as the way out of economic depression. Besides, Keynes admitted in the German edition of *The General Theory* that his theory of employment and output was 'much more easily adapted to the conditions of a totalitarian state.'

In putting Keynes under scrutiny, Narindar Singh shows that in focusing only on the volume and not the content of employment, he and his followers are responsible for a gross and unpardonable misallocation of economic resources. On the one hand, the destruction of work due to constant technological advancement is built into the very structure of industrial society. On the other, the runaway kind of military spending pre-empts such resources as could otherwise be available for creating authentic employment.

Singh continues his exposé of economics by examining the ideas of Paul Anthony Samuelson, whom he considers as the most important legatee of the Keynes-Hitler sodality. However, it is not Samuelson *per se* but Samuelson as the embodiment of the mainstream economic world-view

that the author is interested in. He shows persuasively that this economics is a 'counter-entropic, counter-factual, counter-existential and, possibly, counter-intellectual orchestration'.

The list of illusions and fallacies that economics creates are many, with disastrous consequences. At the root of these illusions lies the reductionist, short-sighted and 'one-eyed' nature of economics by which it takes note only of part of reality and completely ignores what may be staring us all in the face. Also, this supposed 'science of choice' divorces itself completely from the choice between right and wrong.

Take, for instance, growth, which is measured in terms of the size of GDP. Whether it is military spending, or activities destructive of natural resources (27,000 million metric tons of topsoil every year lost through erosion; tropical rainforests likely to disappear altogether by AD 2057; 140 plant and animal species becoming extinct every day; temperature increase of one to four degree Celsius expected in the next fifty to seventy years due to greenhouse gases; ozone depletion...), or the creation of unmanageable waste (26,000 tons of trash everyday produced by New York alone), or the destruction of human health in the process (70,000 chemicals in use in the US – little is known about the health effects of 80% of these), the economists continue to only see and be fixated on growth. But given the rapidly proceeding destruction of natural resources what stares us menacingly in the face is nothing but economic *involution*, not evolution.

To continue to ignore all these novel realities under the guise of *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal) can only signify a kind of psychic timidity and intellectual incapability. Indeed, the relentless destruction of the terrestrial habitat can only be described by the phrase *omnibus peioribus* – all things getting worse. But the economists will have us believe instead that technofixes are or will be available to take care of our real or contrived needs. Witness Nobel laureate Robert Solow, for instance: 'The world can, in effect, get along without natural resources, so exhaustion is just an event, not a catastrophe.'

Another illusion that economics generates is welfare. Samuelson claims that USA is a humane society. While he talks about the unemployment insurance and public welfare benefits, he nowhere mentions that only one out of every eight benefit dollars reaches Americans in poverty. Rather than unemployment insurance, it is the entitlements, tax subsidies and pensions to the rich amounting to \$ 1,000 billion every year – which, in effect, subsidise consumption by the rich – which are responsible for inflation.

The other major source of the budget deficit in the US is military spending. Here again, the complicity of the economists is symbolised by Samuelson's comment in the context of the Vietnam war that 'America could "afford" an even larger war as far as the economics of the problem is concerned'. No comment on the shocking actions of the US state in the Vietnam war.

Narindar Singh sums up well the economists' attitude in this limerick:

An eminent Don of Masstech  
Has invented a thing called Revealed Pref.  
But in the over-revealed Pref. for Arms  
He sees no possible source of harm.  
For in all the orgies of the Pentagon  
He finds nothing but a relentless growth Amazon.

Another fundamental problem with economics is that it is counter-entropic, that is, it contradicts the laws of thermodynamics. 'Undaunted by the law of conservation and the law of entropy *both*, the theory of economic growth continues *implicitly* to assume that matter-energy can be created *ad infinitum* and also that by a transformation of disorder into order, the Arrow of Time reversed.'

Economists, in keeping with their one-eyed nature, would have us believe that despite the existential reality, today all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Is this why, as Narindar Singh notes, there has never been a union of concerned economists unlike the union of concerned scientists who have warned us that human beings and the natural world are on a collision course? This book serves as an adequate warning for those who are willing to hear, that economics, if it has to be pertinent, has to put the military industrial order under relentless examination and has to turn its attention to the relationship between the biosphere and the socio-sphere.

**Rakesh Kapoor**

**INDIA'S ARTISANS – A Status Report.** Society for Rural, Urban and Tribal Initiatives (SRUTI), New Delhi, 1995.

THOUGH many of the oppressive features observed during colonial and pre-colonial times are today absent in India, most artisans live in abject poverty. Many artisans are giving up their traditional occupations and taking up other forms of work, mostly unskilled, daily-wage labour, which assures them higher returns. This trend has been observed by a survey conducted by SRUTI, a Delhi-based NGO. The survey has found that in more than half the traditional leather artisan households, several family members had given up leather work and were working as casual labourers. One fourth of the potters interviewed said that their children had chosen occupations other than pottery.

The findings of the survey have been brought out by SRUTI in the form of a status report on the artisanal sector in India. This report presents a broad overview of those involved in artisanal production in the country. Edited by Kanika Satyanand and Shekhar Singh, the report has been prepared with the specific objective of recording the state of artisans and identifying the major constraints faced by them and describe the historical evolution of the current

status of some selected groups of artisans. It also reviews government interventions affecting the sector.

It is well known that artisanal incomes are extremely low: in 1987-88, the average annual income of artisans interviewed by SRUTI's investigators was Rs 4899. The survey also reports that artisans hardly own any assets. The major asset is a mud house. 60% of the artisans interviewed did not possess land. The other assets commonly owned by them are the tools of their respective trades. Some of them also own livestock or cattle. 46% of the artisanal households surveyed did not have electricity connections.

Most artisans are employed in their traditional activities for an average of 6-8 months in the year. This under-employment is due to various factors such as declining demand for their products, inadequate working capital and raw material shortages. As a result, many artisanal households are compelled to supplement their income, most often through casual work. For potters, the problem of seasonality is particularly acute as their work comes to a virtual halt during the monsoons.

35% of the households interviewed reported an annual expenditure of less than Rs 5000. Over three-fourths of the sample had an annual expenditure level of under Rs 10,000. Given the low level of incomes and the high living and production costs, indebtedness for most of them is a way of life. 47% of the artisans interviewed were found to be indebted.

On the social front, heredity, caste and community affiliations continue to play an important role in the artisanal communities. A large number of artisans belong to the scheduled castes and tribes and even though there are subtle variations in the status of different social groups, in the broader social context they continue to occupy the lower-most rungs assigned by the caste hierarchy. In all the areas surveyed, the association between particular castes/communities and artisanal activities seemed to be fairly straight. In the case of pottery, metal work, leather work, cane and bamboo work, the number of first generation workers was correspondingly small. Caste and community barriers, however, seem to be gradually breaking down, particularly in the case of relatively dynamic manufacturing activities such as tailoring and wood work, which are attracting a large number of first generation workers.

A diluted version of the *jajmani* system still exists. The survey found that many artisans, particularly potters, cane and bamboo workers, blacksmiths and wood workers still retain ties with their traditional *jajmans* or patrons. But many of them were against the peripheral obligations that they were expected to perform *vis-a-vis* the *jajmans*. They felt that the *jajmani* system had no place in a monetised economy where cash is required to meet everyday needs of shelter, clothing, food and consumer durables.

Going down the paths of history the SRUTI report found that in most parts of the country, artisans ranked lower than the landholders in the occupational hierarchy and settling

in the centre of the village was forbidden to many of them. Data from the *Ain-i-Akbari* indicates that their 'incomes afforded no scope for savings that could lead to accumulation of capital' or the acquisition of assets. The wages of artisans in Mughal India 'ranged from bare subsistence to a reasonable degree of comfort'. Only a handful of artisans earned large profits and their upward mobility was severely restricted. The bulk of the capital required by the artisans came from their meagre savings, which were geared to a hand-to-mouth existence, the surplus from one season's earnings providing the working capital for the next.

While socio-economic dynamics of independent India has effected a complete transformation from that of the Mughal period, the elemental truth about the artisanal socio-economic condition remains unchanged. For many artisans and their families, the government's aim of providing total literacy remains a distant dream. According to the survey, nearly 50% of the heads of households were uneducated. The corresponding figures for their spouses, sons and daughters were 90%, 30% and 41% respectively.

This rich field-based account of the traditional artisanal sector in the country is extremely relevant and serves to draw attention to sections most seriously affected by the ravages of the market.

Parashuram Ray

#### **COLONIALISM, CHEMICAL TECHNOLOGY AND INDUSTRY IN SOUTHERN INDIA, 1880-1937**

by Nasir Tyabji. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.

THE growing volume of literature on the economic history of India and its different regions through the colonial period has immensely enriched our understanding of the economic conditions of the country in the recent past. We now know that colonialism acted on all regions of India, but it acted differentially on different regions. This was conditioned by differences in pre-colonial circumstances as also differences in the process and timing of British conquest, and so on.

But there were certain features that were common to the whole country, almost without exception. Europeans had better access to government patronage, public subsidies for the construction of infrastructural facilities and large scale finance as compared to Indians. Industrial entrepreneurs in India during this period had to take into account, apart from the given structure of authority and class relations, the international economic environment. Indian enterprise, specially small scale enterprise, generally had to face heavy odds and discriminatory treatment in its attempt to clear for itself even a small corner of the domestic or international market.

The structure of incentives, signalling devices and screening processes that colonialism fostered go a long way to explain the behaviour of Indian investors and producers.

In this situation, trade and finance related to intermediary rights in land had a premium over industrial investment, specially in cases involving a gestation lag, a long learning process or when adopting methods of economies of scale. New industries which were setting the trend in the developed world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were mostly out of bounds for Indian ventures.

Metallurgical, electrical and chemical industries were generally capital and skill-intensive, displayed strong economies of scale and required government protection. Education, specially technical and industrial education, received the lowest priority under the existing policies of the government. Consequently, the productivity of labour in India not only remained low but also slid down in comparison to the industrially advanced countries. Labour was one of the worst rewarded factors of production and public investments took little notice of the needs of survival of the poor. All these forces tended to depress the growth of the internal market, making it an insecure base for prospective investors. On top of all this, the fragmentation of many markets under the twin influence of a port-oriented infrastructure development and monopolising tendencies of British business houses permitted inefficient production technologies and market control methods to be firmly entrenched in the economy.

It is important to remember that under colonial conditions, the process of convergence and fragmentation of the market often took place simultaneously, largely determined by the degree of interlinkages of different factor and output markets. Unequal exchange between the major cities and the countryside accelerated the process of transfer of resources to the major cities that began with the rise of corporate trading houses. In the Bengal and Madras Presidencies specially, the volume of investible resources generated by trade did not get transformed into actual investments in industry, though the situation may have been somewhat different in the Bombay Presidency. The measure of the economic 'drain' from colonial India may perhaps be partly explained by the form of utilization of the resources that flowed out from the countryside in different regions of India. For this reason, regional variations in land relations become an important explanatory factor in defining the structures and the boundaries of the markets in different parts of India. The different degrees of market involvement of cultivators or landlords or trader-moneylenders reflected the interlinkages of land and credit markets in the various regions. That this type of inter-regional imbalances were accentuated in the post-colonial Indian economy gives this historical experience a contemporary relevance.

The merit of the book under review is that it takes all these analytical perceptions into consideration by weaving them into the narrative text describing actual developments in industry or industrial technology in southern India during this period. Additional insights are provided by giving

the political background and the power equations that conditioned the existing social structures in the Madras Presidency and the princely states of Mysore, Travancore and Hyderabad. Even more noteworthy is the attempt to analyse the developments in capital accumulation and industrialisation within distinct regions in the Presidency or the surrounding princely states, the basis on which 'claims for greater political and commercial prominence were asserted' by the emerging regional leaderships.

The book starts with the political conditions and the administrative intervention in the promotion of industries during the start of the 20th century, pointing out the imperatives of the logic of imperial rule and economic exploitation that constrained such attempts from the beginning. The author argues that it is as important to study financial and industrial policy, all along the line of official hierarchy, as the process of industrialisation itself, given the paramount importance of transferring financial and real resources from India to Britain. This is followed by a description of the genesis of the chemical-based industrialisation, primarily from oilseeds (although other raw materials are not ignored) upto the post-First World War period.

The succeeding chapters are concerned with developments in the inter-war period, both for industries in general and chemical-based industries in particular, with the focus on the impact of the 1929/30 depression on industrial development. The opportunities opened up to Indian entrepreneurship to step into the vacant space created by a disruption in imports and the re-allocation of domestic resources from trade and credit in the primary sector to industry were to a large extent cancelled out both by imperial fiscal and commercial policy and the fragmentation of the market caused by the peculiar nature of economic development under colonialism. Further, the entry of the Indian subsidiaries of multinational firms into the new branches of industry created new areas of dependence for Indian capital and entrepreneurship. The situation in the cottage and small scale industries comes in for special attention. In the concluding part, the book deals with the totally altered scenario at the end of the Second World War, when the process of decolonisation was well on its way. One wishes that there were a few indicators about what all this meant in terms of the programme of economic reconstruction that followed. But one can understand the necessity of stopping at an appropriate juncture that divides the history of colonialism from post-colonial problems.

**Saugata Mukherji**

**MIGRATION, REMITTANCES AND CAPITAL FLOWS: The Indian Experience** by Deepak Nayyar.  
Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994.

THIS book focuses on the macroeconomic effects of migration and remittances on the Indian economy. Earlier

research on this theme concentrated more on why people migrated abroad and its effects on regional development. Kerala, for instance, has a long history of migration and is somewhat over-dependent on remittances and money orders. These amounted to as much as one-fifth of the state domestic product (SDP) and sustained Kerala's annual household per capita expenditure and regional growth. Nayyar highlights the impact of such phenomena at the national level which has been relatively favourable on India's balance of payments (BOP), although its downside was evident during the early 1990s when huge capital outflows triggered a crisis, clearing the decks for India's ongoing reform agenda. Fortunately, this was a one-shot phenomenon.

Nayyar's study shows that India's long track record of overseas migration had a colonial context. More recently, there were two distinct streams of migration: one comprising of a move to the industrialised countries since the early 1950s and the other to the Middle East during the 1970s. The average outflow of migrants to the industrialised countries increased from 10,300 persons per annum in the 1950s to 38,300 persons per annum in the 1980s. Over this period, the UK made way for the US as the major destination of such flows. The movement to the Gulf roughly amounted to 2.3 million persons between 1976 and 1990. The outflow of such Indians, nevertheless, constituted only a small fraction of the increments to India's workforce or the stock of domestic educated labourers or unemployed. Naturally, the overall impact of international migration on India's domestic output was negligible. The BOP effects, however, were substantial, as the ill-fated experience of 1991-92 showed.

Migration from India is associated with two sorts of financial inflows: remittances and repatriable capital. Considering the latter's precarious nature, they were also referred to as 'hot money'. Remittances reached a peak level of US \$2.7 billion in 1980-81. During the early 1980s, they were close to 1.5% of GDP, 2% of private final consumer expenditure, 7% of gross domestic savings and 7% of gross domestic fixed capital formation. More important, such inflows were the equivalent of one-quarter of export earnings and one-sixth of the import bill and were sufficient to finance as much as 40% of India's massive balance of trade deficits! This was their macroeconomic significance; they reduced India's current account deficit to manageable proportions, in turn obviating the necessity to borrow abroad to pay for excessive imports over exports.

Similarly, there was a spurt in repatriable capital inflows during the 1980s as they touched \$10.4 billion in 1989-90, attracted by higher rates of interest. These inflows, similar to any other form of borrowing abroad, provided external resources to finance the current account deficit. The upshot is clear. According to Nayyar, 'remittances from migrants improved the balance of payments or, in the more recent past, prevented it from deteriorating as much as it otherwise would have. Similarly, repatriable deposits eased



balance of payments difficulties but, when large net inflows turned into massive net outflows, the capital flight accentuated, if not precipitated the crisis in the balance of payments.'

The remaining macroeconomic impacts of such migration-induced inflows were relatively minor. On India's exports for instance, their impact was positive as Indian migrants to the Middle East created a demand for ethnic foods and thereby triggered more exports. On imports, the overall impact was small, although Nayyar notes that remittances from migrants possibly helped sustain the import liberalisation process which began during the late 1970s. Equally, capital inflows from migrants helped sustain the import liberalisation which gathered momentum in the mid-1980s. These are useful insights from a careful assessment of BOP and other data on a topic which hitherto has largely been dealt with by historians and sociologists. Such an effort is also daunting as BOP data comes with a lag and is highly aggregative. Nayyar has used all his expertise in analysing India's trade performance to give a lucid treatment of international migrations' impact on India's BOP.

N. Chandra Mohan

**PLANNED SEGREGATION: Riots, Evictions and Dispossession in Jogeshwari East, Mumbai/Bombay, India** by Miloon Kothari and Nasreen Contractor. YUVA/COHRE, Bombay, 1996.

THERE are different ways to understand events like the communal riots of 1992-93 which devastated and divided the once cosmopolitan city of Mumbai. The media hardly contributes to a fuller understanding of such events because it is preoccupied with the present and does not contextualise events. As a result, even the people living within such turmoil fail to comprehend the many underlying reasons for the occurrence or recurrence of such clashes.

Some of the people best placed to understand the before and after of riots, whether they are communal, caste or between groups of people and the state, are those who work with communities at times of peace and conflict. Mumbai has a growing number of urban based non-governmental organisations and community organisations whose primary constituents are the 50% of the population that live in its slums.

While many organisations mediate between urban poor communities and the state on issues such as lack of housing, basic urban services, education and employment, their efforts are often confounded by politics. In many instances, political groups have enhanced their hold on urban poor communities by acting as their brokers. But it is this political presence that makes the poor see themselves as different communities and religious groups instead of as people in the same economic circumstance. The events in

Mumbai in 1992-93 revealed graphically how the exploitation of these religious and caste differences can disrupt some of the strongest bonds that have been forged on economic issues.

The book under review contextualises one of the areas of conflict in Mumbai in 1992-93. An incident in this north-eastern suburb of Mumbai, in which six members of a Hindu family died when their house was set on fire at night, allegedly by Muslims, has been quoted as the trigger for the second phase of the Mumbai riots. These were much worse than the first, both in terms of loss of life and property. However, a closer study of the area in which this tragedy took place, and the events preceding it, clearly reveals that this was the culmination of many factors.

An in-depth study of one area reveals clearly how these other factors work and play upon underlying tensions. Jogeshwari East is typical of several other slum colonies in Mumbai. It has been affected by a series of laws and government orders that legalise parts of it while rendering some parts illegal. As with other slums, the land on which the houses are built includes government-owned land, private property and municipal land. In each instance, a different set of rules applies. In the end, however, the reality of such a large agglomeration usually forces governments to 'recognise' a slum and provide it with some basic services such as water and sanitation.

What is interesting about Jogeshwari East is that it has been the scene of not just one communal clash, but a series of clashes that began more than 20 years ago. The reasons have often been frivolous, such as a fight over water, a scarce commodity in most such areas. With each successive riot, the distance between the two major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, has grown. After each clash, one group has been forced to leave their homes and settle in another part of the slum where the majority belong to the same community. As a result, in the course of 20 years, there are now areas which are almost entirely Muslim and others which are almost entirely Hindu. Of the seven areas that the authors have looked at, five are almost entirely Hindu and two are almost entirely Muslim. By way of contrast, in 1970, the four areas that existed in the slum then were almost evenly divided between Hindus and Muslims.

This process of ghettoisation has often been talked about after the 1992-93 riots. However, there is little data to substantiate it. This book has finally presented facts that clearly reveal that the process was already underway before the last riots and has probably been consolidated consequent to them. As a result of this dislocation of populations from one part of the slum to another, there are situations which fester and remain a constant source of irritation and tension. A Muslim burial ground, once located in a mixed population area, is now surrounded by Hindu houses. As a result, Muslims no longer feel confident about taking their dead to this ground. They now have to travel a considerable distance to another burial ground.

Although the attempt by the authors to link the communal clashes in Jogeshwari East to other issues such as land and housing is commendable, it is disappointing that they were unable to provide more details about the incident, the burning of the Hindu family on 8 January which made Jogeshwari East 'famous' despite their in-depth knowledge of the area. The box item on the Gandhi Chawl (or Radhabhai Chawl as the press called it in most reports) is disappointing. Indeed, today, thanks to the proceedings of the Sri Krishna Commission, much more is known about the incident and the series of events that preceded it.

The criticism of press coverage is also rather weak. Given the authors claim that they sporadically monitored a large number of newspapers, it is surprising that they report only a single inaccuracy in one English paper. It would have been more useful and relevant to quote what the Marathi, Gujarati and Hindi newspapers reported about the Jogeshwari East incident. Indeed, as is now well known, it was the provocative headlines and reports in these Indian languages newspapers, as well as the direct marshalling of the reaction by the Shiv Sena, that triggered off the second stage of riots in Mumbai in 1993.

In sum, however, the study provides a useful insight into the life of a typical slum colony in Mumbai and reveals how many such places are just waiting for a riot to happen.

**Kalpana Sharma**

**THE ORDER THAT FELLED A CITY: A Citizen's Report on the Politics of Pollution and the Mass Displacement of Workers in Delhi. Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch, Delhi, February/March 1997.**

IT is the mark of our times that judicial orders (or for that matter executive fiat) that threaten to uproot lakhs of people right below our noses arouse little concern. A 36 page booklet brought out by the recently formed Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch is a welcome reminder of what happens when the judiciary decides to fight pollution. In response to a writ petition on the pollution of the river Ganga, the Supreme Court of India ordered closure/relocation of industrial units to places outside Delhi. As part of this, in the first phase 167 units were shut down, affecting nearly 50,000 workers. This was followed by another 513 and finally 39,000 units in the coming months. More than half of the nearly 9.1 lakh workers, therefore, face the spectre of joblessness, uncertainty for their families, and having to fend for themselves at a moment when the labour market is shrinking.

This booklet highlights certain glaring anomalies behind the judicial orders. The basis for the various orders was Delhi's Master Plans (1962 and 1991). These plans were approved without public debate and have little to say about the bulk of the population, their needs and requirements, of making available elementary municipal services such as

water, latrine, sewage, public transport, and so on. The highest court's interest in the non-implementation of the mandatory provisions of the master plans has compelled them to take such measures. However, not only were the provisions of the DMP not implemented by the very same administration responsible for these flouted rules, they allowed, nay encouraged, unrestrained sprouting of units in Delhi. Yet no action was taken against the authorities for non-fulfillment of their statutory duties or against the owners for non-compliance with their obligations. What is more, the report points out that while the idea was to de-congest the city, ease the pressure on municipal services by moving people out of Delhi, the opposite happened. For instance, while Jagmohan forcibly removed seven lakh people from Delhi in the name of the health of citizens of Delhi during the Emergency 'the population of Delhi had grown to 62 lakhs far exceeding the 50 provided for in MPD-62... (and) the ring towns grew even faster than Delhi and the NCR population was 52% higher than projected'. (p. 21) Thus the very basis of judicial orders is not above dispute.

If fighting pollution was uppermost in the minds of the honourable judges, then the next question is whether industry is primarily responsible for pollution. The report points out that official agencies such as the Central Pollution Control Board, whose findings formed the basis for phased relocation of units beginning with those that fall into the category of large and hazardous industry, have themselves established that the single biggest source of air pollution in Delhi is vehicular traffic (64%), followed by power units (20%) and then industry (15%). Where water pollution is concerned, domestic treated waste water from affluent households accounts for 64%, compared to 21% untreated water from poor households. It is true that industrial waste water is more hazardous, but no more than 45 units are responsible for 50% of this. In other words, where was the need for singling out industrial pollution as the main culprit?

But the report goes on to show how the order to close the units will not prove onerous for the owners and that it is the workers who stand to lose all, for no fault of theirs. The orders allow the owners of the units to retain a portion of the money from selling the land at the prevailing market price. The 8 July 1996 order of the highest court comforted the industrialists that 'reuse of vacant land is bound to bring a lot of money which can meet the cost of relocation'. In fact, far in excess of this. The report points out that workers are supposed to be provided compensation; one year's wages for units relocating somewhere else and six years wages for those closing down. Given that even minimum wages are not paid to the workers (and Delhi has seen years of struggle for implementation of minimum wages and better working conditions), unit owners will only be giving away a fraction of what they will receive from selling the land. What is more, not all workers will receive compensation because only those in 'continuous service' under Section 25 B of

the Industrial Disputes Act are so entitled. No Indian factory has more than 50% of its employees on its rolls. The rest are contract labour who may have been working for years but are not classified as permanent employees. Thus all workers will not receive compensation.

The implication of the above, together with the stated objective of the highest court on 'deconcentrating the population', makes it clear that there is a class bias in singling out workers. Indeed, the experience of relocation undertaken by Jagmohan also shows that those forced out can expect little from the authorities and will be left to their own devices to survive.

In 36 pages, the report has managed to bring out serious lacunae in the Supreme Court orders. In that sense it is extremely useful and timely. However, one must also point out some glaring omissions and shortcomings. For one, there are no maps. Nor is there any basic statistics about the city. In fact, there is no background that highlights in tabular form various statistics cited in the report. More significant is the lack of distinction between polluting units and hazardous ones. For obvious reasons hazardous units must be shifted out of densely populated areas, whereas there are other choices open for polluting units. In this respect the report does not critique the judiciary for dropping the earlier insistence on setting up effluent treatment plants rather than concluding that their relocation was absolutely necessary. There is no effort to highlight the plight of the families, in particular the women and children and their rights. What happens to working women whose husbands may have to move out? Their children's education? What about the struggle to build their lives which today are threatened? It is surprising that while opposing the court orders, the report does not go into the question of conditions inside the units. How can one talk of pollution without demanding a change in the conditions in which people work?

What is jarring, however, is the claim that one must challenge the arguments which speak of 'unlimited natural resources' and oppose 'the alienation of traditional communities from their land, resources and labour'. Why? What is it that lends credibility to these beliefs? Is the statement about 'unlimited natural resources' truly representative of everyone who favours progress? Is there a fundamental difference between the left or the right on this issue or as the report seems to suggest none at all. This is a controvertible hypothesis. Moreover, both 'traditional' and 'modern communities' want to participate in decision-making which affects their lives. In other words, they are not opposed to change and do not desire to preserve or freeze their conditions of existence. Rather, they demand their involvement in development.

One assumes, however, that the authors are not against development and are in favour of reversing the present status of this country as a low consumption society. That seems to be the impression one gathers from the demands when they, for instance, argue for a better public transport system

which is implicitly in favour of better use of resources. Rather, one hopes that the authors are also aware of the need for technological advancement that encourages low energy consumption rather than the horrendous waste by less advanced or even traditional communities. Indeed, it will take lot more than an assertion to establish that 'urban people's struggles, over the past few decades' have been concerned with the 'rising cost of living'.

Put thus it is easy to conclude that there is need to 'go beyond attempts to improve our standards of living to ask the fundamental question – do we or do we not have a right over the air and water of our land'? For one, urban people's struggle encompasses the struggle of workers for minimum wages, of slum dwellers for better living conditions, for access to municipal services and so on. For another, fighting for higher wages is a struggle for better living conditions and therefore is in exercise of people's right to air, water and land. Indeed, I fail to understand the argument that reduces all previous struggles to the straitjacket of 'higher wages and other conveniences', used in a slightly pejorative sense. Especially when there has throughout been a struggle that has challenged the capitalist path of development taken by our country. While the above may be true of the trade union movement to a certain degree, to reduce everything to this level on the basis of this specific experience is wrong. In fact, on reading the report, an over-riding impression is that it brings out how those denied minimum wages, better living conditions, access to water, latrines, sewage, electricity, those not responsible for causing industrial hazards or pollution and so on, instead of fighting for improving their lives have to fight a rearguard battle to save their jobs. In such a climate the fundamental question is the people's right to be involved in any decision that affects their lives. In this sense even organisations such as DJAM must be more rigorous in writing reports and in the collection and presentation of their analysis.

Saral Vidrohi

**WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT 1995: *Workers in an Integrating World*. Oxford University Press (for the World Bank), 1995.**

THE *World Development Report 1995*, the 18th annual publication of the World Bank is devoted to the question of labour. Appropriately titled *Workers in an Integrating World*, there is little doubt about the timeliness of its publication. In the Foreword, the Bank's President James Wolfensohn, highlights the reasons for devoting an entire report to labour, thus: (i) reduced government intervention in markets and (ii) increased integration of trade, capital flows and the exchange of information and technology. The timeliness from the third world point of view, or more specifically, from that of third world labour, too cannot be underestimated given that in the 'new world order' they are

becoming the major pawns in the heightened struggle between different capitals – with metropolitan capital even managing to garner the support of its ‘own’ working class. The position taken by the American trade unions in the NAFTA debate, for example, is one glaring instance.

The working class of third world countries stands at a peculiar juncture in history where it is being called upon to take sides in the debate on the so-called ‘social clause’, the terms of which have been set by the trade warriors of the first and the third worlds. In either case they stand to lose. If they support the first world demands for sanctions they lose out because, *given globalization*, in the short run at least, there is little scope of improving working and living conditions if the country’s economy as a whole lags behind; if they support the position of the third world states, they lose out because the structural inequities responsible for their plight in the first place continue.

It is time, therefore, to step outside the terms set by the dominant discourses and formulate a different position that is in keeping with the interests of the third world labour.

In the last twenty years or so *globalization of production* has already taken place, with the transnational corporations (TNCs) producing their goods in parts in a number of countries and then assembling them in some others. Increasingly, their inter-departmental transfers need to cross the borders of nation-states and the trade barriers erected by these states stand in the way of such a free movement of goods and capital. The battle that is being fought in the trade arena is, therefore, at least in part, an imperative of that transnationalized production. The process also represents a frantic search for and creation of newer markets by transforming the huge continents of the periphery into *real markets*.

This is done by first opening up the burgeoning middle class markets of countries like India and exploiting them to the maximum. But this will also be done by transforming the vast countryside of traditional, pre-modern economies into adjuncts of the market – *a transition from formal subsumption of labour to the real subsumption of labour to capital*, or what the Bank calls the transition from ‘self-employment’ to ‘wage-employment’.

The World Bank celebrates globalisation and the document opens with the claim that ‘(T)hese are revolutionary times in the global economy.’ (p.1) However, it is a bit uneasy about the fact that, ‘...rapid change is never easy... there are fears of rising insecurity as technological change, expanding international interactions, and the decline of traditional community structures seem to threaten jobs, wages, and support for the elderly’ (p.1). This unease is a feature that runs throughout the report for reasons that shall soon become clear.

The WDR 1995 must be read in the light of the various contradictory pressures within which the Bank has to function, including those that emanate within the northern economies and TNCs themselves. In his Foreword, the Bank

President claims a continuity of the present report with the WDR 1990, widely accepted to be a reformist document from the Bank’s perspective. To an extent this is true for two sets of reasons:

a) Over the last few years, there has been a strong campaign in the North and to some extent in the South, which has attempted to make the Bank more accountable and its dealings more transparent. The internal Wapenhans report and the Bank’s subsequent effort to *look* more reasonable and transparent are but manifestations of this pressure. The experience of the structural adjustment programmes in the decade of the eighties has also shown that they have been miserable failures even on their own terms. The realization has therefore dawned on the Bank that these programmes must be given a *human face* and implemented democratically.

b) The Bank’s advocacy of free trade certainly squares with the demands raised by the TNCs to pull down trade barriers but it runs against the demand for a ‘social clause’ in multilateral trade arrangements that many of its donor countries are raising. Yet, it cannot afford to be seen arguing against certain minimum labour standards. Further, there have been demands from some quarters in the North, including the trade unions, for restricting the movement of capital to low-wage areas in the developing countries as that eats away their jobs. Dogged with high levels of unemployment for many years now, the fear among workers and trade unions is widespread. Thus for instance, the position taken by most of the first world unions and NGOs working on labour issues on the question of the social clause, coalesces with demands raised by these states.

It is for this reason that while the text of the WDR 1995 advocates that market-led economic growth is good for the workers, the sub-text reflects the above mentioned unease. That is probably why the entire document maintains a reformist posture, even while its crusading ardour for free-markets remains undiminished. The meaning of market-led high growth, epitomized by the Bank sponsored structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) for the workers, is a story that has been told repeatedly, across continents. It has been told for the nth time in the report. Take two observations from the report:

‘Major transformations are associated with massive employment restructuring – many jobs must be destroyed and many new ones created. Both hires and separations increase dramatically during periods of major change, creating turmoil in the labor market and uncertainty for the workers. In former centrally planned economies, as well as in many adjusting Latin American and Middle Eastern countries, *formal employment has fallen by 5 to 15 per cent and real wages by more than 40 per cent in extreme cases, before recovering.*’ (p.108; emphasis added)

The last clause ‘before recovering’ is meant to convey that the dislocations were indeed temporary, as the faith would assert. The second observation is that:

'The poor may find it especially difficult to cope with the falls in wages and employment that tend to occur during the transition. Sometimes women are disproportionately affected... A review of evidence certainly suggests that labor does suffer during adjustment, and maybe worse than other groups.' (p.104)

However, the WDR 1995 is exceptional insofar as it suggests some apparently radical sounding positions. Caught within the tensions of selling SAPs worldwide and at the same time trying to find ways of cushioning the impact on the poor in general and the workers in particular, the report devotes considerable space to exploring ways to reduce this pain. In so doing, the report goes *well beyond* its usual verbiage of safety nets. One of the most remarkable prescriptions that follows from this exercise is on the right to collective bargaining and trade union rights. This position, a departure from the usual Bank rhetoric of union bashing (especially in the 1980s), contains many interesting dimensions. The introductory chapter entitled 'Overview' poses the question thus:

'If support for the rights of workers to form unions and to bargain collectively and support for the reduction of child labour make sense in a national context, should these principles be linked to international trade agreements, with sanctions for their violation?... (it) is best to keep multilateral trade agreements confined to directly trade-related issues to prevent protectionist interests from misusing such links to reduce the trade that workers in low and middle-income countries need if their incomes are to rise.' (p.6)

The forthright position of the Bank is welcome, insofar as it stands opposed to the social clause. The suggestion that low wages *even as competitive advantage is a non-trade-related issue* certainly holds out some hope for third world countries, more so, of course, for their exporters and industrialists.

Two major articles of faith seem to have prompted the World Bank to take this position: (i) A provision of sanctions for non-compliance with respect for labour standards would go against the spirit of free trade. (ii) On the other hand, any suggestion that third world governments intervene in labour markets to set things right would send out wrong signals when it was trying to convince these very governments to withdraw from the economy altogether. To be fair to the Bank, it is still not against public action in the context of the informal sector and especially child labour.

However, given the above dilemma, the best option from the Bank's point of view was to emphasize the role of unions and mechanisms of collective bargaining in determining the optimum labour standards that should prevail in any country. This would be a mechanism very much in line with the mechanism of the market, particularly in conditions of the retreat of the state. Free trade unions (i.e. without the backing of political parties) and in a situ-

ation where the buffer of the state as the third party does not exist, can only mean that there will be highly unequal contests of power.

The experience of the decline of tripartism and the parallel trend towards decentralized, enterprise-based negotiations has been an unhappy one for unions all over the world. It is easy in this scenario to advocate 'free trade unionism', for it rests on the basis of a dismantling of the post-war social contract between capital and labour, that of the welfare state. That probably explains the Bank's charitable attitude to such 'free trade unionism'.

However, the Bank's position as well as that of the countries demanding the inclusion of a social clause in international trade practices, affords an opportunity to bargain with the Indian government and employers for a better deal. The fact that many Indian employers and industrialists are also seeking the cooperation of workers in the fight against foreign competitors provides further opportunities that can be exploited by labour organisations.

A word, finally, about the Bank's attitude to the question of employment and livelihoods. The report's perspective is typical of the arrogant modernizer who looks at the subsistence economies of the third world countries as a despicable drag on humanity's progress. It is true that these subsistence economies are no longer viable and the income they generate is appallingly low. Many of them suffer from prolonged pains of transition as their integration into the world economy that began from colonial times continues at a heightened pace. It was a process that upset their balance. Formally they were subsumed into the capitalist economies which changed the logic of their existence; yet, their internal organization remained the same as before. Once inserted into the world market, they cannot but be affected by the dynamics of that economy. This is the story of many artisanal communities, forest communities, fisherfolk, and so on. To these communities the transition to wage employment represents a *loss of control and ownership* over their productive assets and their common property.

It is not possible to understand this dynamic in terms of the purely economic discourse of the World Bank. It is symptomatic of our times that just as the rise of the nation-state hijacked the sovereignty over resources from local communities and placed it in the hands of the state, the advent of globalism seeks to relocate it in the emerging centres of the new world order. Everybody must be transformed into a wage worker and every resource right upto our neem tree must, in the name of a dubious intellectual property, should become the property of some transnational based in the North. Never mind the fact that centuries of oral tradition had already recorded the use of this knowledge, now sought to be patented. The report, in spite of its radical sounding rhetoric, encapsulates this urge.

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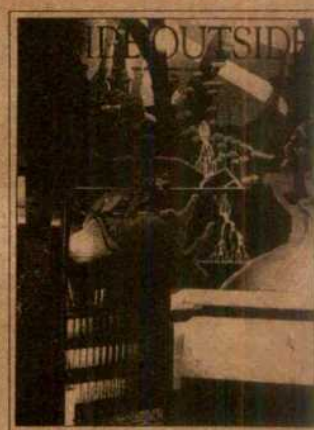
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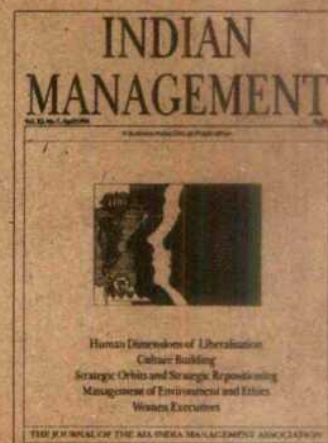
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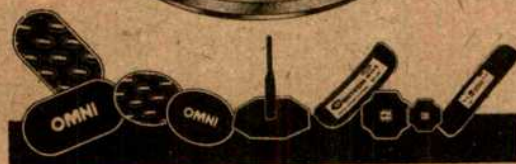
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# Communications:

## Conservation thoughts

A RECENT visit to Kanha, Bandhavagarh and Panna National Parks (NPs) in Madhya Pradesh pointed to some of the emerging themes in wildlife conservation in India. These NPs provide an illuminating contrast to their counterparts from U.P. such as Rajaji NP. At the risk of repeating platitudes, there are some important directions as to how we, in the process of liberalisation directed to higher rates of economic growth, can better manage our natural patrimony. These tentative suggestions, involving a greater role for private participation by various elements of Indian society, are discussed below.

*Size Matters:* There is little value in increasing the conservation budget for a small park like Ranthambhore which can hardly be extended, let alone protected effectively, given the insurmountable pressures from without. There may be other reasons for the state government to protect Ranthambhore, but a park like Kanha with an area greater than 2,000 sq km offers outstanding conservation value.

Kanha is already connected by forest to Achanakmar NP near Amarkantak, the source of the Narmada. The forested Maikal hills of the area are also connected to the park allowing for the dispersion of wildlife. The nearby Phen sanctuary is in the process of being added to Kanha NP proper. The forest adjacent and connected to Kanha thus adds up to an area of some 5,000-10,000 sq km. It is in such a large area that a viable population of tigers can exist. Some 20 animals each in Sariska or Ranthambhore are simply not viable twenty years hence (they have already been reduced to around 4 or 5 in each park by poachers!).

The forest corridors around Kanha need urgent protection before development catches up, even as the grazing populations have started rising (with rising human populations). Poaching has been greatly controlled in Kanha, but animals are being regularly killed outside. If the tiger needs to be saved, a stronger effort is needed for greater Kanha than for all the small parks combined. For other reasons, and other animals, conservation efforts are needed at the small parks too.

Bandhavagarh NP is being extended to include Pan Patha. Like Kanha, it is also surrounded by

degraded buffer forests and can well be extended to some 2,000 sq km. Extension to the Johilla river and inclusion of the adjoining Vindhya hills is a must. This will involve the removal of several insular villages. Given that the park authorities have not even been able to remove 6 villages in the current park area for more than 10 years, there is much to learn about rehabilitation from the Kanha example conducted by H.S. Panwar in the '70s. Rehabilitation must be done sensitively with the participation of villagers, who would be glad to move because of crop damage.

Panna at some 540 sq km is small compared to the other two. However, Panna is already de facto connected to two sanctuaries in the west going all the way to Jatashankar. The forested Panna hill range extends virtually all the way to Sagar on the south west and Kalinjar on the north east, so further extension is possible. A larger Panna can allow for the dispersion of wildlife generated by improved conservation in the core area. For the purpose of protecting the Vindhya range protection of the Shyamgiri-Nagod forests north of Maihar is also essential.

A large national park offers greater protection to wildlife. Park increase can be justified by the development of tourism. Tourism can then be dispersed over the park area. From the point of view of the conservation of biological diversity, it is far better to conserve a smaller number of large areas well than to conserve a larger number of small areas poorly.

*Employment:* Tourism can create a significant number of jobs outside the park. But not enough, obviously. What then about those who do not benefit by exclusion from the park?

Although it sounds anathema to the Indian conservation establishment, the simple answer gleaned from experience the world over (witness South Africa and the Conservation Corporation) lies in private forests being raised on lands adjoining these parks. The generation of these forests will create employment as well as benefit wildlife, effectively increasing the protected areas. These lands can be misused for *shikar*, but so too are adjoining farmlands being misused today. Here is another role for wildlife tourism. Private forests can be managed for tourism. They would gener...



more revenue (and far less problems) for the owners in being used for tourism rather than for shikar.

The controversial issue of shikar can be handled by a letting an individual offer shikar on a piece of forest which is raised from ruin and degradation (to be certified by an apolitical, far-green committee to be set up for the purpose) or started from scratch. No one can then complain of the depletion of wildlife by legitimate shikar. If the individual can raise a lot of money from sport shooting and wildlife populations actually increase then there is no reason for not allowing the area to grow.

Now, anyone can buy land and raise a forest. This would take 20 years. Here is a controversial suggestion, particularly in light of the experience of the wasteland development exercise in India, where lands have been given away indiscriminately for non-forestry purposes to the politically connected. Degraded forest lands outside the park could be given on a 100 year lease to selected private parties for rehabilitation and the development of tourism. These forests could be raised in 5-10 years. The government could stipulate the employment of local people for tourism and forestry works. Private silviculture can employ as many people as forest department silviculture. Tribal populations can also be accommodated in this scheme.

As in all such schemes, transparency in the selection and regulation of the private parties is critical. Perhaps only those parties who are strongly capitalised, or who offer grants-in-aid as part of corporate giving for rural development (again, to be monitored by the likes of far-greens and Price Waterhouses) could be considered. Landlords from the area, political bigwigs and ill-motivated NGOs could simply be excluded by the sums involved.

*Tourism Helps:* Tourism, while being a nuisance for the forester, actually helps. It generates employment for guides, restaurateurs, hoteliers, local shopkeepers, mechanics, and so on. Further, it helps create a local constituency for monitoring tigers, for effectively patrolling roads, rest houses and entire forest blocks. Guides are trained by the park authorities. They become champions of conservation in their villages. An information network about main mammals is set up in adjoining areas. Ecological information is disseminated outside the park.

Tourists should also be asked to pay fees in excess of that being currently charged. These fees should be earmarked into an eco-development fund for purchasing land in critical buffers and corridors. The funds could also be used for rehabilitation of insular villages and to pay for crop damage. Further, these monies could also be used to purchase pagers and cellular telephones for forest guards.

The government should immediately get out of the tourist infrastructure and leave this to the private

sector. Else park directors will continue to spend more of their time booking accommodation for sundry VIPs. It is not clear what should be done to forest rest houses which are being regularly used by politicians. Should they be managed by state tourism authorities and the customers charged? If so, the infrastructure would definitely be improved, though the clientele might have to be restricted.

The publication of educational materials and maps for tourists helps make parks more approachable. In this regard, the construction of forest roads for wildlife viewing is not harmful. The same roads may be used by the forest guards. Tourism can also be developed in the buffers to increase vigilance and to take pressure away from the core of the park. Tourism should be restricted to a certain carrying capacity already identified in advance.

It is unfortunate that a mature effort by the Karnataka government to pass on a government property at the edge of Nagarhole to the Taj group on an 18 year lease has been opposed by so-called environmentalists on behalf of some representatives of the indigenous population. The project was planned meticulously and would have helped the indigenous population with jobs and in promoting conservation. The monies paid by the Taj group to the government could also have gone a long way in promoting eco-development projects.

Nothing illustrates the role of tourism more than the fillip given to Khajuraho as a tourist destination by the nearby presence of the recently constituted Panna NP. Panna itself may not have received protection, had not Khajuraho promised closer access and communication for outsiders and government officers. A similar enterprise should be able to carve a our 200 sq km plateau forest into a park around Orchha, which is fast developing as a tourist destination (though without the planning that went into Khajuraho). The fine teak and anogeissus forests between the Betwa and Jamni rivers are crying for conservation.

*Development:* The excuse of a national park may help develop the local telephone network, power and water supplies, rail and air connections and so on. Local people may be told why they are the focus of public investment which should also include the development of animal husbandry, bee-keeping, cottage industries, and so on. The idea is to sell the park to the surrounding population. The park should be seen as a magnet rather than an inhibitor for development. Well-planned and participative rehabilitation schemes which increase the welfare of the displaced should be seen as an opportunity for using the park as an excuse to enhance the quality of life of remote, forest-dwelling communities. Unfortunately, most rehabilitation schemes have not involved public input, unlike the

highly successful Kanha resettlement implemented by H.S. Panwar in the early '70s. Consequently, rehabilitation schemes have largely failed, and, spurred by environmental activists, the notion of rehabilitation has acquired negative connotations.

*Park Management:* Corporate or foundation sponsorship for select parks is a possible method of raising funds for infrastructure development, insular village relocation, local employment generation and land purchase for corridors. Sponsors could be given rights to use the park for advertising, as well as the use of selected rest houses for visiting managers and for hosting conferences. Corporate sponsors may institute handsome annual prizes for forest guards who arrest poachers; they may provide vehicles for anti-poaching invigilation. Corporations can motivate forest guards by providing employment to the relatives of those guards who are injured or killed by poachers. In other words, some private sector type management practices of rewarding merit can be instituted into park administration. The adoption of a rehabilitated village outside the park by a corporation on the basis of conservation could also go a long way to support the forest administration.

Naturally, any relationship with corporations should be started up centrally, either by the WII or Project Tiger. Further developments can take place locally. This is to ensure transparency and the regulation of the relationship at a senior level. There is no doubt that companies from a number of sectors like tea, coffee, tourism, airlines, hotels, as well as local manufacturing will be glad to join up. Similarly, local schools and colleges should be encouraged to develop strong connections with neighbouring parks. School children may be given concessional entrance and programmes arranged for them in the park. School children may raise money on campaigns for park projects. This will build tremendous support for conservation. After all, the parks are being administered in the public interest.

All such monies raised should be constituted into an endowment component and a project component. The former would be administered centrally (for example, by the WII in Dehra Dun); the latter locally by the park director and a local management committee comprising prominent citizens, conservationists, tourism operators, NGOs, representatives of the district administration, local corporate industrialists, academics, and so on.

The suggestions discussed above have some features in common: they are pragmatic rather than being ideologically motivated, they involve greater participation by the public for whom these areas are being managed, they recognise the role of private enterprise and initiative (many forests in India have

survived because they were once private property!), and they recognise the inevitability of faster economic development in India which will bring both more destruction and more affluence. This development cannot be stopped given our large population; it can only be harnessed to minimise the destruction.

The Ricardian Theory of Rent suggests that a consumer will spend more today if he knows he will earn more in the future. The gigantic consumer credit industry worldwide is premised on this economic view. Governments spend more if they feel revenues will increase in the future. The aggregation of private and public consumption serves to increase production for the economy, which increases revenues in the future anyway. Viola, economic growth!

The imperative for conservation stems from the same economic point of view. India will be prosperous in the future. A prosperous India can afford to save its forests and wildlife. Prosperous Indians will value wildlife. Hence India should invest in conservation today. This is an elitist proposal from the public point of view since scarce lands can be used to produce food. However, since Indians from all walks of life invest in their children's education for the same reason as India invests in conservation, it is time we discarded this rejection of elitism.

The ideological baggage of the last 40 years has to be discarded to accept elitist thinking on Indian conservation, just as it is accepted in justifying costly investments in Indian defence, space research, and technological development. These investments are undertaken by a poor country in order that it will not always be poor. True, funds are needed for investments in the social sector and should come from the scaling down of the Indian government which currently runs businesses ranging from watches to hotels, from airlines to tea plantations. Just as the private sector must eventually take over these businesses which it can manage better, so must private initiative be allowed to help the management of India's natural resources.

Leaving the management of India's protected areas outside the ambit of Indian private initiative and institutions will continue the same decay and destruction that has been witnessed in all areas of Indian life which the Indian government system manages. The same Indian economic system which is unable to deliver telephones or electricity to consumers who are willing and able to pay, will not be able to deliver in a sector as critical and complex as the management of national parks and sanctuaries to a nation which recognises their importance. Anyone who questions the merit of involving private initiative in the management of India's protected areas should just think of the fact that the Orang and Pobitora sanctuaries in Assam have been settled with immigrants by the Assam government. The

settlers have 'legitimate' pattas in exchange for a promise of votes in the future. Regardless of manifestos, all political parties support the same transaction that took place in Assam and is taking place in Khatima in U.P. and Satkosia Gorge in Orissa and scores of other places. Would private Indian initiative and involvement be that bad after all?

**Himraj Dang**  
New Delhi

## Commerce as conservation

CONSERVATION thoughts from M.P. is a charmingly schizophrenic attempt on the part of Himraj Dang who wants to have his cake (protect nature) and eat it too (hand over forests to corporations). I have little doubt that the author's heart is in the right place. But I would hesitate to pass the same judgment about his logic.

It is symptomatic of India's new yuppie attitudes to imagine that instant financial and technological solutions are available for virtually all problems. Thus, we see such impractical, indeed incredible, options being put forward by the author as five-star tourism to create jobs and *shikar* to raise money and forest cover. Apart from this, there is also a suggestion that because a PA (Ranthambhore) is small and has outside pressures, it should receive low conservation priority from the central government. By this token almost all small PAs, which account for a significant percentage of endangered species left alive, would wither. And now to specifics.

*Size matters:* The author mistakenly presumes that the only animals of worth in tiger reserves are tigers. And, since 'some 20 animals each in Sariska and Ranthambhore are simply not viable 20 years hence,' he suggests that funds be diverted to larger parks such as Kanha. This, of course, misses the very purpose of Project Tiger, 'to protect *representative* habitats and ecosystems'. Of course Kanha and its corridors must be protected, but if the funds from Ranthambhore and Sariska are diverted for this purpose, we would lose hordes of specialised arid zone fauna and flora not found in Kanha at all.

*Employment:* From this point on, the author's 'conservation thoughts' virtually degenerate into a sales pitch for elite tourism and *shikar*. Hand over forest lands to 'selected private parties for tourism' is the up-front refrain in which local villagers have no role to play other than as servants for the rich and famous. He wants villages to be moved out and large enterprises (witness South Africa and the Conservation Corporation) to move in... after 'raising from ruin' some forest cover on 'degraded' lands. This is the

precise logic which the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) tried in vain to impose on the National Environmental Council to permit big business to commercialise forest lands.

*Tourism helps:* By now we have more than enough evidence from Ranthambhore, Kanha and Bandhavgarh to show that the living standard of the vast bulk of local communities simply does not improve with luxury tourism. Equally, it is clear from the tragic history of tiger deaths around these reserves that tourism is no deterrent to poachers. As for the suggestion that we 'buy cellular phones and pagers for protection staff out of tourism revenues,' the idea is so bizarre as to merit nothing more than incredulity.

He goes on to suggest that 'the construction of forest roads for wildlife viewing is not harmful.' On what basis? Will there be less siltation from tourist roads? Will fewer trees be hacked down during construction? Will such roads enhance or reduce forest access? Will they reduce or increase disturbance for animals? The list of anomalies and contradictions grows as one proceeds down the list of suggestions.

'So-called environmentalists,' he says, 'opposed a mature effort' by Karnataka to pass on government property at the edge of Nagarhole to the Taj group, which he believes would have 'helped the indigenous population with jobs and in promoting conservation.' In attempting to justify such a preposterous idea, he actually suggests that the Panna national park received protection because of the tourism in nearby Khajuraho. But only a mere handful of tourists from Khajuraho are even aware of the existence of Panna.

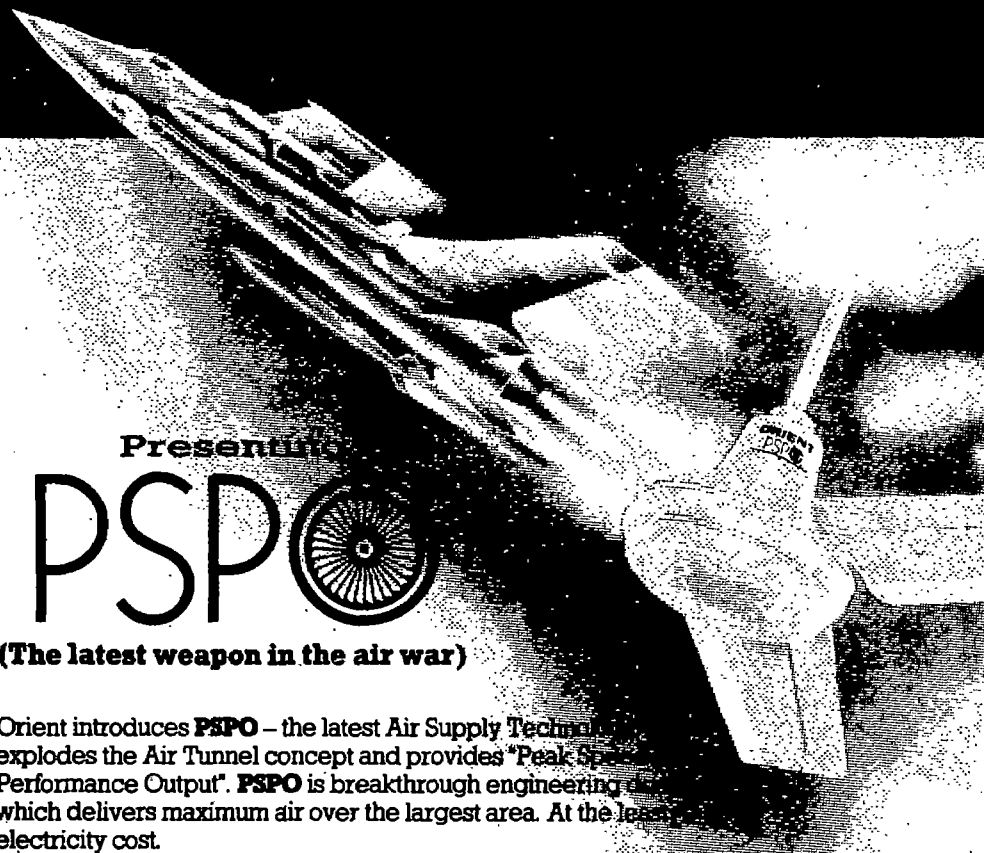
While skimming over issues concerning 'development' the author suggests that local telephones, power, water supply, rail and air connections have benefited wilderness areas. I for one have yet to see a tiger or butterfly benefit from interventions from such human infrastructures, all of which must necessarily be carved from the tiger's true infrastructure for survival – the forest.

Perhaps the most dangerously naive suggestion to emerge from this amazing document is the one suggesting that large corporations be tapped for funds to help displace isolated villages in exchange for advertisement rights inside the Park! Ouch!

At this point, I believe it is time for the defence to rest. I leave it to readers to respond directly to the author. I would be grateful to receive a copy of such communications so as to keep track of this fascinating effort on the part of the author to hard-sell commerce as conservation.

**Bittu Sehgal**  
Editor, 'Sanctuary Magazine'  
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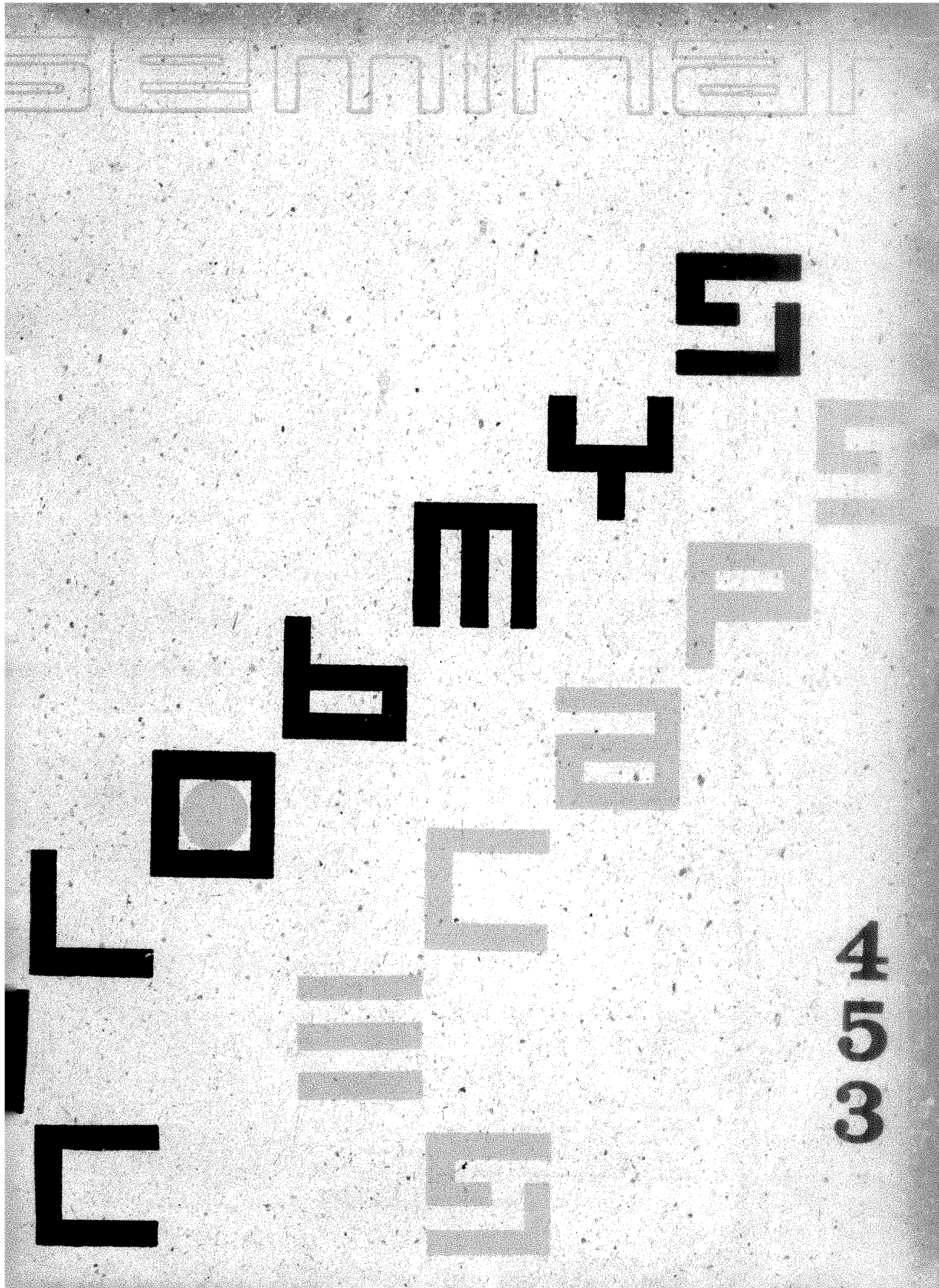
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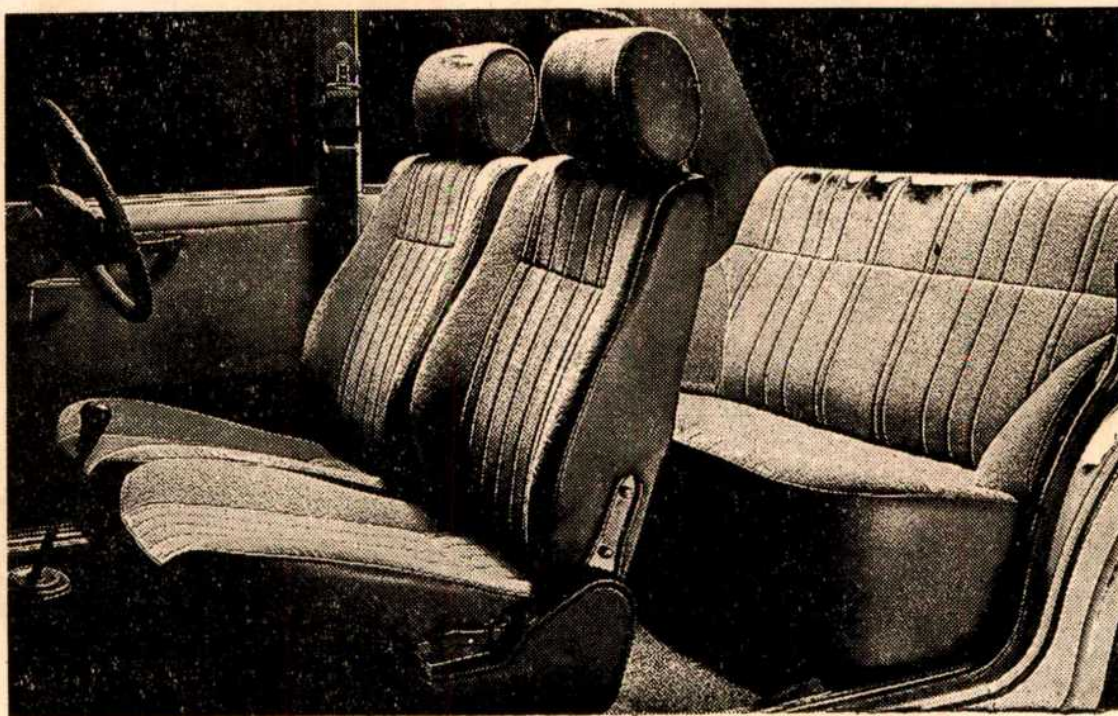
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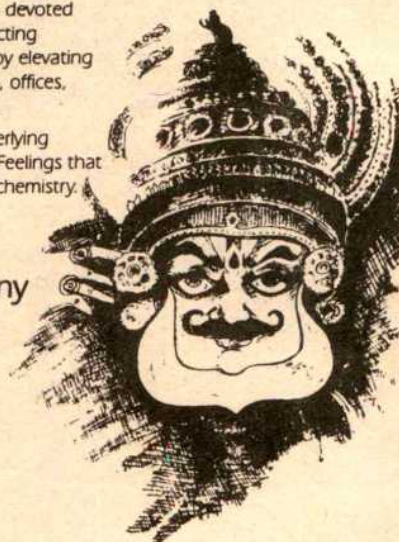
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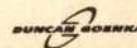
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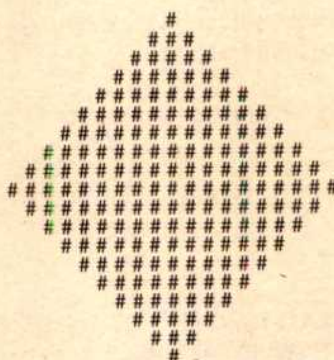
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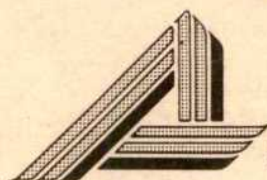
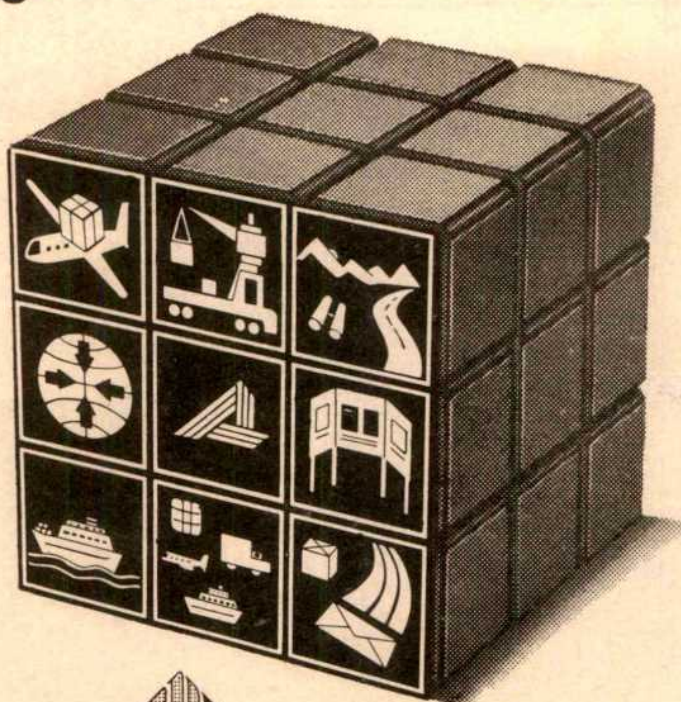


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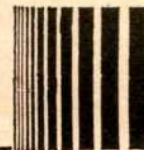
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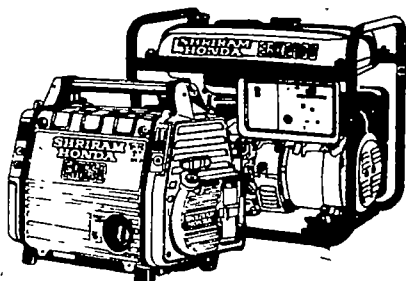
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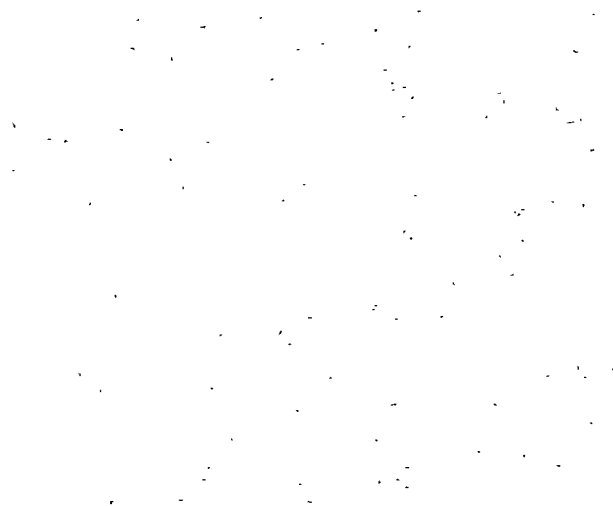
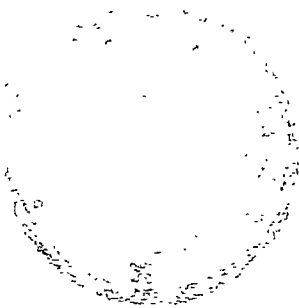
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symposium participants



- 12 **THE PROBLEM**  
A short statement  
of the issue involved
- 14 **TWO HEROES OF OUR TIMES**  
V. Geetha, freelance writer involved with children's  
publishing, Chennai
- 16 **LOOKING AT MISS WORLD**  
Melissa Butcher, International Communications  
Programme, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
- 21 **TOURISM AND THE IMPERIAL GAZE**  
Rose DeNeve, Department of Anthropology,  
Syracuse University, USA
- 25 **MARKET LIFE OF AMAR CHITRA KATHA**  
Nandini Chandra, doctoral student, Department of  
Linguistics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi
- 30 **POPULAR ROMANCES**  
Urmi A. Goswami, research scholar and member  
editorial team, 'The Eye', Delhi
- 33 **COOL, COOL BEVERAGE**  
Kristy Bright, Ph.D. candidate in Cultural Anthropology  
at the University of California, Santa Cruz, USA
- 38 **GANDHI GOES TO NID**  
Shiv Visvanathan, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of  
Developing Societies, Delhi
- 41 **TECHNOFUTURES**  
Ravi Sundaram, Fellow, Centre for the Study of  
Developing Societies, Delhi
- 47 **BOOKS**  
Reviewed by Primila Lewis, Anita Roy, Romi Khosla,  
Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Ravi Sundaram
- 53 **FURTHER READING**  
A select and relevant bibliography
- 57 **COMMUNICATIONS**  
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A. Varshney, Cambridge, USA
- COVER**  
Designed by Madhu Chowdhury  
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## The problem

THE opening up of the economy and market has resulted in a veritable profusion of not just goods and services, but images and dreams. The media has become the new marketplace where ideas and symbols jostle for marketshares. Resources and talent combine with skill and aggressiveness in the fight for dominance.

For years we inhabited a staid world. Now, not just business but every aspect of our public culture – sport, music, books, films, charity and above all politics – is fashioned around manipulation through the media.

Take Yanni. Who amongst us had even heard of him? Then came the Star TV promos of Yanni at the Acropolis. Within weeks, or was it days, the composer in surf white, flowing hair and all, practitioner of a peculiar brand of elevator music, had become a new icon, particularly for the young. Come 1997 and we had Yanni at the Taj. 'I want to immortalize peace and love. The world should know what the Taj stands for.' The mausoleum, where so far even Sufi *qawallis* had been a no-no became the site for the cultural

event of the year. Politicians, administrators, police even the army, vied with each other to make the event a success. The protests, not frivolous by any means, about the possible impact on the building – and more important about the appropriateness of the site – were ignored, drowned out by the thousands who paid astronomical sums to be there. And be seen.

Clearly, nothing is sacrosanct. Nothing escapes the cannibalising instincts of the new image managers. Dance festivals at Khajuraho, fashion shows at the Qutub, cigarette hoardings at sport events – the past, cultural traditions, values and dreams – are all selectively deployed, packaged and spewn out. Each event, a mix of sound and visual bites, serves to tease, attract, hold attention.

Not all of this is in service of mammon. Selling dreams, exciting fear, invoking hope or hatred has slowly become the stuff of politics. More than issues, policies, programmes, serious debate, it is images that today make or mar political fortunes. In 1977, it was the cut-outs of

George Fernandes that symbolized the horrors of the Emergency while holding out the promise of freedom. Come 1984, and we had the Congress (I) ad campaign where our neighbours, particularly the religious and cultural minorities were redesignated as enemies. The effort was to generate apprehension, insecurity, to get us to vote for order. And we did, overwhelmingly. L.K. Advani's *rath yatra* was no different. A 16th century mosque, now called a disputed site, became the symbol of a new India. An ersatz India that sought to wipe out the collective humiliation of the past.

Even social concerns, to be heard, now seem to demand image management. Clearly, it is insufficient to be good, or do good as a basis for seeking support. So groups working on child labour end up organising public hearings, parade the victimhood of the children, collect them from all over the country, get them to march on the streets of the capital on a hot afternoon. Why? Is it necessary to put young children through all this? Yes, we are told. Because years of patient work, preparing detailed status reports, petition-

ing policy makers has not worked. The media demands drama. So we stage an event.

This new world of images, the deployment of new symbolic strategies, has implications for the ways in which we look at ourselves, define ourselves and our objectives – personal and social, individual and collective. The new Indian, at least the urban, middle class young is no longer confined to the world of the family, kinship groups, caste and community. He is out in the new marketplace. The market has become the polis. The new struggle about how to reach out to them, move them, get them to buy and to act demands new understanding, new frameworks, new and creative strategies.

This issue of SEMINAR interrogates some of these worlds – of reading, travel, film, events, chat-shows, consumption, of how symbols are constructed. The effort is to explore the ways in which we present ourselves and are presented – the making and unmaking of a new public culture. Welcome to *symbolic spaces*.



# Two heroes of our times

V. GEETHA

HE fascinated me with his marvellous mock-romantic dance in the Tamil film, *Walter Vetrivel*. As the heroine swirled around in a brilliant green, yellow and red skirt, inviting seduction, our long-legged hero matched her step for step. He looked hurt, proud, angry in turn, as she teased him with a shake of her hips, her pout. However, he always let his hurt show. He made it clear he could dance as feverishly as her, be as shamelessly coy. Only his body, even as it mimicked the movements of a lovelorn hero, expressed an energy, an insouciance all its own. It was as if it could not be bound by norms, as if it would, albeit reluctantly, recognise their existence, even abide by them, but yet return to its secret grammar, its own performance space.

The exaggerated arching of the back, the legs that fold up as if they had turned to water, the hips which choreograph the text the entire body simultaneously performs – Prabhudeva, described as the ‘new Indian dancing sensation’, embodies a sauciness which goes with youth; which is born of living in congested, urban slums, where every-day you learn to re-affirm your sense of being through novel acts; where speech, of necessity, is double-voiced, rhetorical, calculated to catch the public ear; where relationships are charged with drama and recognised or rejected with an appropriate flourish. Gestures, voice, movement: all of these narrate a tale of survival, of living through incredible dirt, hunger, vicious crime, interminable gossip, fear, violence and death.

Prabhudeva is a natural hero in this milieu, where boys and young men

recognise themselves in his tight, curly hair, his full thick lips, his soft eyes and, most of all, in his body which defies gravity, even as they defy exhaustion and death. Prabhudeva’s vulnerability is his charm. He looks so much in control of his body as he bends, breaks, slithers to his own inner rhythms. Yet his dangerously supple limbs tether forever on the brink of oblivion, seem detachable from one another, troublesome in their obstinate autonomy.

Consider, now, young men from urban slums: well heeled, at God knows what cost, self-conscious in their peacock-like pride – yet they betray an unease. Their faces are too gaunt, their arms and legs too painfully thin. Their defiance is often pathetic, touching, even pubescent. They may argue over taxi fares with you if they happen to drive one in the city; they may even try to make a pass at you. But in an alien environment, say, in an office space they trespass on, running an errand, they behave with exaggerated politeness. They are powerless in their courage, in their invented selves.

Prabhudeva combines in his body the hapless courage of slum youth as well as their inability to hold on to it and work in into sustained, purposive action. He converts, in fact, transmutes defiance into style, courage into physical self-expression. And the boys love it. In the absence of meaningful action, the body decides to perform, narrate its stories, draw attention to its semantics.

What about women in the city whose labour often fetches those prices young men pay for their hair-do, their trousers and imitation Reeboks? Women

in these urban spaces work with an aesthetics of the tongue. They harangue, imprecate, curse, are foul-mouthed, cry and mourn, if need be, sing. They are necessarily fork-tongued, speaking a language of tradition and a lost rural context, as well as a language of the city which is packed with phrases from different contexts and languages. While they may express a worshipful love of their men, they are also given to berating them and resort, often enough, to a language of rights with practised ease. They speak of oppression, of violence and threaten to take their erring husbands to the police or the law courts.

**Y**oung women in the city's slums play with colour, covet bright hair clips, smartly-cut blouses, wear their hair pulled back high or braided. Women who are mothers love to dress their children up as Prabhudeva. These kids mimic their hero's dance to perfection. The mothers are proud, indulgent. Yet older women whose sons desire to be like Prabhudeva feel easily annoyed as well; angry that they should pay for a simulated style, that their hard-earned money should be spent by feckless young men on fine clothes and useless foppery. But young and old women sigh over a son, a nephew, the youth next door who does a Prabhudeva in front of a captive audience on a summer night.

The problem is that though women clap their hands to Prabhudeva's beat, their bodies do not, indeed cannot, give in to the lure of loose-limbed dances, cannot bear to let go. For that you have to be a different kind of a woman, not the one that lives on the margins of survival. You have to be the woman that actress Goutami was in the Tamil film, *Gentleman*, clad in a sequined tight skirt and blouse that stops at her navel, and who shakes her shoulders in obvious ecstasy and is languid about her ability to lust without fear or guilt. Or you have to be that Nagma – in the Tamil film *Kadalan* – who dares to confront the hero's effrontery with her knowledge of a superior culture: she dances the classical *bharatanatyam* to his local version of rap

and thereby kindles his sense of shamed honour and his determination to live up to her expectations.

**O**bviously neither of these options are open to slum women. A Goutami is a product of that male fantasy these women know only too well and are repelled by. She is the proverbial 'other woman' they have been taught to disparage or admire secretly. Nagma is the woman they encounter in their daily lives, working at domestic tasks in many a rich home. Her petulant assertions of independence annoy them because they know, in their hearts, that freedom is a fearful thing, not be had for the asking.

More importantly, they want a different kind of a hero. A mythic man who is reassuring, who lulls their fears into quiet. These fears are myriad: foraging in an urban slum brings with it its own worries. Then there is your friendly neighbourhood creditor. He is patient, but relentless. 'Going on the road' is definitely a risk, whether selling flowers, peddling vegetables, fruits, soliciting, begging – each of these acts wrings a woman's nerves out, exhausts her already emaciated and malnourished body. She endures harassment, bullying, cheating and, of course, sexual assault. The children worry her. Dusk conjures up all sorts of unnamed fears. In tiny little mud-walled homes which stand out bravely against the city's sewage, not much courage can be gained from flickering oil lamps. Women dream of strangers breaking in, dream of alien men possessing them.

Prabhudeva cannot mollify their sorrow, their rage, or attend to their apprehensions. His introverted energy cannot cure their angst. Further, he is narcissistic and self-love makes these women impatient. They encounter it daily, even in those men who claim to be godly. Truly nothing angers women in the slums more than the spectacle of men clad in black and saffron, a rub of beard on their cheeks, their foreheads anointed with sandalwood or sacred ash, sporting prayer beads that swing from their necks at a rakish angle as they go about keeping their fast for an

annual (or bi-yearly) all-male pilgrimage to some shrine or the other. Their style bothers women, intimates to them the existence of a male fraternity which is contemptuous of women. Prabhudeva too is such a pilgrim of style and they have no use for a body which makes performance a matter of worshipful piety.

Young or old, the women go for the cavalier, Robin Hood like Rajnikanth, as they earlier did for the long dead actor M.G. Ramachandran. These are men of substance, unerring in their respect for the women they cherish. They define codes the good woman would not hesitate to abide by and hint at promises to be redeemed and fulfilled, if only a woman was to honour them. And women simply love to be that good, patient, self-sacrificing, wise woman who deftly moves from cavorting under the trees with her lover to being the perfect, loving wife. There is a strange sort of voyeurism here, a guilty look at a buried life every woman wishes to hurriedly disown and reconcile to the image they see on the screen.

**A**bove all, Rajnikanth triumphs over disaster, survives the wiles of this unfriendly world through his sheer presence. His is a style women feel indulgent about, just as they do with the antics of the gods. His swagger and his incomprehensible talk is endearing because it is quaint, free of decorum and civil speech. It makes him familiar and yet constructs him as an icon because he can be thus and yet make it in the world of money, cars and beautiful women. As the local don, the righteous milkman or taxi driver, more generally as a fixer with a heart of gold, he communicates a comforting and care-less sexual energy that women hug to themselves. Never mind that he is harsh on harridans, educated, rich and arrogant female brats. He is responsible, his self-love seems so right because he makes himself worthy of the love of women as well. Above all he is there when the needy need him. Prabhudeva, on the other hand, is capricious, too wrapped up in his own drives, in the poetry of his body. Between the dancer and the fixer, women prefer the latter.

# Looking at Miss World

MELISSA BUTCHER

GLOBALISATION requires a sense of order, today lets call it modernity, and a contemporary symbolic landscape, a series of images as a backdrop to explain and promote its perpetuation. Now the audience is more drowning than floating in a sea of signified narratives, of advertising and billboards, of soap operas and scandal sheets, of competing versions of international news informing us of what happened in our country today. As we are no longer content, or able, or allowed to look at ourselves, a contestation begins between the images of 'modern' order and those local images accumulated in notions of body, nation, and identity. New genres of the visual have emerged to subsume both the local and global. Look at the spectacle for example: the indigenous spectacle of prime minister's arrests and Bollywood scandal, is joined by Michael Jackson, World Cup cricket, and Miss World 1996. Their mediatisation has contributed to the construction of order and identity within contemporary India.

On looking at Miss World, this silicon pumped representation of India becomes the site of the body and blood of nation. Indian identity becomes intrinsically attached to a reconstructed past that must also be more modern than the

equally constructed 'other' of the West. This high church of spectacle presents us with a soteriology, a doctrine for our salvation in 165 minutes, including ad breaks. You can consume for your daily bread of imagineering: sex, glamour, your national identity, a world view of modernity (pick a box, any box, there's a dream house at the top). Lights, cameramen, capture vision on vision, the image of the presenter, the body, the set, the nation, echoes around the stadium on giant video screens, and into your home. This spectacle of Babel, all colour, noise and movement, denies any substance as repeated exposures, slogans, and protestations abstract their meaning, leaving enough residue for the purposes of ideology, and enough nebulous space for identificatory interpretation. The spectacle in this sense is the mystic alleviator of prosaic life. Fast colour, drip dry, kneel before the idol of nation and television.

The beauty pageant 'showcased' Indian culture in two dimensions, idealising images of order and laying claim to a reality constructed for global consumption.<sup>1</sup> Global in that Miss World

1. R. Robertson's notion of globalisation, that is, local reading of global phenomena, or global construction of the local.

had two audiences: Indian and foreign, local and global. What was specific to the local broadcast was presented in the first 45 minutes: a musical denotation of geographic unity in diversity appropriate to current national sentiment. Same backbeat for unity, different costume for diversity. If they are dancing with sticks then it must be Gujarat. The international broadcast on the other hand reinforced Indian difference without overstepping the parameters of the international order of 'modernity'. It is a globally constructed 'local'.

**T**he presentation is globalised, with MTV feeding into local dance and music rhythms and the production space encapsulated within particular parameters of taste defined by Miss World Inc. European art forms are included in the form of chaperons in three-piece, black-tie suits with 'the girls' in ballgowns and evening wear marking out cultural ideals of sophistication and elegance. You don't need to think too hard as sound and visuals cue your emotions. Everybody sing along with Mark West, Producer, Republic of South Africa.

'At the end of the day.... we show the women and the entertainment and the country that is the host country. It has a lot of India in it. Bear in mind the show goes to the whole world so it cannot be all India.'<sup>2</sup> The local is then chosen from the stock of 'India', the easily recognisable: the Taj from various angles and at various times of day, the cow, the elephant, the camel, the sunset/sunrise, villagers dancing. Dip into the dress-up box we kept as children. The images are de-historised, de-contextualised. They are removed by the lens from their site of activity and placed in a backdrop as substanceless and formless as the stage setting, becoming a music video that doesn't interfere with the progress of modernity's play. For the international viewer, the exotic is familiarised. For the local viewer, the familiar is exoticised.

This process of globalisation creates a pulp culture where the ingredients of India are collated, masticated and

regurgitated disposable representations: cardboard cutouts of Kathakali dancers; wooden Hampi; *papiermache* Rajasthani horses and welcome lamps pile up on the ground backstage. This cultural packaging is limited to the depiction of a Hindu, middle to upper class, glamourized version of India. The sets creator, art director Sabu Cyril, in response to a question as to why no Islamic motifs were depicted, responded with: 'Moghul is not totally India,'<sup>3</sup> instantly bowdlerising his creation.

Similar distortions are made to occur in the restrictions television imposes on frames of order as improvisational cultural forms are divided into two and a half minute slots to be fitted in between segments. The creative director, Priyadarshan increased the pace of every art form during the pageant, citing it as 'boring if we broadcast in the traditional way.'<sup>4</sup> Just as classical art is condensed for the increasingly temporally challenged, so geography implodes for the increasingly spatially challenged. Julia Morley, Chairperson, Miss World International: 'Not many people know about the Indian woman and I think its good that people have been able to get to know the Indian woman without visiting.'<sup>5</sup>

For the audience, local and global, 'knowing' India becomes limited to that which is depicted, and that which is depicted is constructed to present a particular image of India, a particular identity. That is, modern.

**F**or Priyadarshan, Miss World became an opportunity to show the international community that India is not a country of turban-wearing snake charmers and magicians, but that 'we are technically and culturally richer and (more) developed than those countries or equal to them.'<sup>6</sup> His reasons for including 'Made in India' and Mallika Sarabhai's improvisational dance piece was to emphasise Indian culture as different from the rest of the world's:

3. Press conference, 16 November 1996, Bangalore.

4. Press conference, 16 November 1996, Bangalore.

5. Press conference, 4 November 1996, New Delhi.

6. Press conference, 16 November 1996, Bangalore.

'We have our culture. These two things are included to show the world that we are aware of their culture and art. Our improvisations, our adaptations are better than what they have done.' And while recognising the limitations of Miss World's international format, he 'tried to smear Indian culture over the programme' so that 'someone in Costa Rica should be able to turn on the TV half-way through and see that this could be India.' In approximately 150 countries and among two and a half billion people who are watching, lies the necessity of recognition as if our existence depended on it.

**M**odern order became spatially delineated as the ability to stage the 'spectacle' itself is a sign of India's modernity. Sabu Cyril not only wanted to 'show the world that we are not backward' but also to 'show the world that we are capable of holding such a *big* event.'<sup>7</sup> Everything is *big*, as big as the West. The banners, the stage, the police presence. Our hosts emphasise that....

Richard: '...This is by far the *biggest* spectacular that Miss World has ever been associated with....'

Ruby: 'Well Richard, you know, its being held in India after all.'

ABCL is the *big* entertainment company. Amitabh Bachchan is the *Big B*. Sanjay Gupta, CEO ABCL, existence in an acronym, tells us that they expect to make 'a substantial (read *big*) profit.'<sup>8</sup> Even karma acquires spatial dimensions: Ruby: 'You know Richard, the concept of karma is *big* in India.'

The set of 14th century Hampi is: Ruby: '...*The* place to be. It was *larger* than Rome and its palaces were considered more *spacious* than the castles of Lisbon.'

It doesn't matter that it was later destroyed by another invader because it can be rebuilt (we have the technology, we can rebuild it). The set lies in a *big* deconstructed heap of rubble behind the stadium one week after the event.

7. Press conference, 16 November 1996, Bangalore.

8. Press conference, 4 November 1996, New Delhi.

2. Press conference, 19 November 1996, Bangalore.

Being *big* affirms India's position as part of the world, further stressed by the North American accents of the local show presenter (whose name the audience is never told); the unseen voice-over man, and Ruby and Richard (that's 'sem-eye finalist', thank you). Master of Ceremonies Stephen Morley hammers home to the live audience before the show began in case they hadn't quite got the message yet: 'You have the opportunity, every single one of you, to be heard throughout the world...' (you who would otherwise be nameless, faceless, therefore worthless people). 'This day will go down in history as the day that Bangalore (cheering), that Bangalore became part of the world, a famous city in the world.'

**W**ithin the confluence of local and global orders, Miss World adds to the establishment of a combative prophylactic (in that it protects us from the 'other') anti-culture. A definition by negation springing up in urban Indian middle class spaces and India's mediascape: the BPL-Amitabh Bachchan advertisements; Pepsi's banners proclaiming 'I want Madonna to record Alisha's songs,' 'I want 35 dollars to equal one Rupee,' 'I just want to scream Buck up, Indiaaaa.' Primarily youth oriented, this identification is manufactured for those who are looking for a space to safely rebel in.

Miss World's creators used antiquity to delineate India throughout the spectacle. While industrialised societies tend to give up their past ('you're history' being a term of derision), in India a particular form of the past is symbolically used to demarcate identity. Modern India is being packaged by its antiquity. India's martial history and strength is shown right from the beginning, the first dance sequence and opening panorama, the men with swords and shields, the women under umbrellas. Another historical marker of strength is the Gandhian victory over Queen Victoria (in two and a half minutes). The mythological is constantly reiterated: the *apsara* logo; the fairy queens escorting Miss World complete with wands and wings. Thanks is given 'to Kubera the guardian of wealth... and

Lakshmi the giver of plenty' as mystic justification for the prizes Miss World is about to collect which include 'magic' carpets. There is the application of the 'traditional *kum kum* or *vibhuti*':

Ruby: 'It's a symbol of peace and brings a soothing effect and a sense of well-being to all that wear it.... How do you feel?' Richard: 'I feel (pause) soothed.'

Ruby: 'It worked!' (applause, canned). The music video 'showcasing' the beach wear was accompanied by a specially composed song, 'India's calling', featuring 'heavenly places (where) dreams do come true,' where 'you'll see enchanted colours that will set you free... on a fantasy.'

Or the Hinglish pop song, 'Made in India':

'Make my dreams come true in the mystic land of India, Made in India, Made in India, all I want is a heart that's made in India, oh oh oh oh.'

There are ubiquitous references to karma: Take One:

Ruby: 'Richard (she says patiently) you've got to remember that India is not just another country. Its mystique impelled the journeys of Alexander the Great, Vasco de Gama, Marco Polo (she says breathlessly).... Its spiritualism ensured that yoga and karma have worldwide acceptance' (she genuflects).

Take Two:

Ruby: 'Wow, that's fantastic (she says excitedly). You must have been an Indian in a past life, I'm sure of it!'

Take Three:

Richard: (the secular westerner) '....And tonight we hope that all of our contestants have a powerful and positive karma.'

**A** word on your hosts for tonight, 'Please welcome... Richard Steinmetz and Ruby Bhatia-Bali' (enter back stage, walk to front centre, smile at each other as they descend).

Scripted, they flash before their own eyes on a six foot prompt screen. Their role is not so much to introduce the forthcoming images as to reassure us that everything is ordered as it should be. First, they assure us and each other that they are looking acceptably 'good'.

Ruby: 'Ladies, doesn't he look great.' Richard: 'Doesn't she look stunning ladies and gentlemen' (applause, canned). He wears a three-piece suit, no collar, embroidered border on vest. She wears a *lehanga*, blouse, and a traditional midriff. They explain to the international audience the oddities of Indian life, converting India from the incomprehensible to an easily consumable bite-size biscuit.

Richard: 'We wondered why no taxi driver would take us anywhere. I mean, no matter who we asked or how much money we offered, they just kept shaking their head.'

Ruby: (Ruby looks puzzled and concerned, hand rises to chest, then mouth opens in realisation) 'Oh! that's the famous Indian oscillation of the head' (applause and laughter).

**T**hey defuse the mystic of its mysticism so its only function remains to denote India's difference. And in case you were starting to think they were being serious, Heeeeeeeere's Richard (following the invocation to Saraswati, 'goddess of knowledge, art and music'): 'and may her force be with all of us' as we jet off into outer space. The illusion of mystique is broken with shots of the set showing it as just a set, back views of the judges, dancers walking across camera as they leave the stage. What India (read ABCL) wants the world to see is 'modern' India. The 'modern' becomes virtual animation sequences; a virtual existence in video links of Air India flying, five-star hotels and office blocks, the catechism of the age.

Why was it so important to prescribe India in this way? In the macro politics of representation, it is the importance of looking in an increasingly monosensual world which privileges sight. 'Seeing', the comprehension of the environment, determines order. 'Oh, I see' equals 'Yes I understand.' If the dominant category of knowledge in modernity is that which can be seen, the question then is a measure of its reality. The spectacle is about the illusion of forms: colour and the form of colour, reality and its form. Myth is created



instead in the projected shadows of the spectacle's phenomena which settle into televisual patterns establishing the form of order.

The spectacle, which in contemporary society is precisely that which is worthy of television cameras, in its projection of mytho-reality's order maintains a certain governance in its ability to absorb the gaze, taking away even our choice not to look. Selection of subject and angle, backdrop and lighting, participate in the creation of order. To expand on Susan Sontag's view of the photograph, the television image alters and enlarges our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe.<sup>9</sup> The camera within the tradition of subject/object opposition defines reality in the ways essential to 'modernity'. First, as spectacle for a mass audience, to fill out the reality which is felt to be dessicated, less than whole. And second, as the object of a physical ordering: on the periphery of the Miss World spectacle, police, army, rapid action forces man streets, block roads, arrange queues, body search my shoes, arrest potential dissonance.

**S**harpening the contrast to reality, the camera has become the standard for the way things appear to us. All that we need to know is on the surface. A sensual linking of the repetitive. Reality is masked using reality. Set reconstructions, lyrics, costumes, all become symbols standing for another primary experience. The stage becomes a sign of the ability to create, and again nature is defeated. 85 men, 70 tons of steel, 4500 bolts and 40 tons of wood had created this particular simulacra. Richard: 'And no safety nets....' Ruby: 'No safety nets!' Richard: 'No safety nets.' Ruby: 'Wow!'

Focus on the set of the body for a while: a site I would argue which is now disassociated from its subject, and as icon is re-sacralised to signify the manifestation of order. Revert to the Durkheimian notion of God necessitating a certain

notion of society, to a certain notion of body equating a certain notion of society. Now the cultural representations of the body link to the making of 'modern' India. During the pageant, the site of identity shifts from nation, blood, language, the holy view to the body:<sup>10</sup> 'I am proud to represent my country,' says Miss India, as the body and blood of the nation is transubstantiated into 5'6" stilettoed, coiffured and made-over images of itself.

**T**o describe the icon, elisions of sight must confuse the meaning of the face, which becomes one with the deity of the contemporary age: 'the international look.' A generic face on legs. Now the body itself must span the local and the global, itself becoming a site of global identification. The image is desexed: neither man nor woman, reduced to two dimensions, flattened in its reproduction. The body's image is only conferred its naturalness on television – underweight becomes the right weight, and the make-up undoes the damage of the lights. The television image provides perfect composition, signifying platonic ideals and a fine example of Barthes' Garbo, where the face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection.<sup>11</sup>

In the pageant, rehearsals, script, dance, movement, everything is ordered. 'Listen girls, its very simple... if you are on this side of the stage you want to get to the other side of the stage.... Walk straight...!' Nothing too complicated. Line them up like a consumer durable, can of beans, sack of basmati. Juxtaposed to these firm legs we see cerebral palsied children and a voice-over tells us that 'cerebral palsy is characterised by lack of control of movement and coordination.' Ugliness. Video footage of war and famine, poverty and chaos, is modishly translated into beauty and order, two stepping, hand waving, raising their arms in the air in climax as we all do to our gods each day praying, 'please don't let me be poor or ugly.'

10. From a conversation with D. R. Nagaraj.

11. R. Barthes, *Mythologies*. Vintage, UK, 1993, first published 1957, p 57.

Compare this to seeing 'the girls' in the flesh as it were, which is not the flesh that is seen in the mirror, is not the flesh that is seen on television, where in costume, with stage sets and musical accompaniment, it becomes something other than us. As a photograph or video loses its quality after successive reproductions, so transference from two dimensions to three diminishes the sense of order. They ache with normality. Hip bones stick out, the skin indented. You should not notice the mosquito bites on her legs, or the split ends in her hair. Cruelly – 'you are normal.' To look at normality we would inexorably be looking at reflections of ourselves. Its horrible, quick – switch it off, turn on the television. The only space for public participation in the spectacle is through the acts of consumption and vicarious pleasure, and the spectator doesn't want normal. No bodily functions can be suggested. It is only the audience who eat and shit.

**T**he spectacle is *maya*, illusion, tricks of light and focus, and despite the impossibility of simulation, we simulate as best we can. The spatial dilemma in the body created by globalisation, the centrifugal tendency of contraction to accommodate a site of local identity and order, and expansion to house an international genericism, is reconciled by physical consumption. We diet, we exercise, we consume a part of the order before us – hair cut, nail colour, off-the-rack imitations of the designer gown. For those without the necessary resources, it is solely the image which is consumed.

In these acts of communion Miss World's bodies become symbols of the primary experience of modernity's order which the masses, the lumpen, can never access. Their image becomes subject to the same laws of laissez faire economics as the rest of the economy, that is, as much spectacle, entertainment, glamour, as the market, the audience in its role as arbitrator of choice, will bear. Woman in water, two three, hair flick, two three, turn to camera, two three, Cinthol across the chest, two three, waltz of economics and entertainment. The notion of competition

9. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. Penguin, UK, 1979, first published 1973, p 3.

exists but there is no zero sum game in this magic show, only the chance that 'we' might win. 'The girls' are, as Richard says, 'contestants,' but 'there are no losers... only winners.' You have to be the best says Rani Jeyraj,<sup>12</sup> 'having to think you are going to win all the time' and 'having to believe you are the best which is the first step to being the best.' It is full of possibilities. Anyone can be Miss World, you can even have 'average looks' because you 'can do wonders with the right makeup,' says Rani.

**W**hile the spectacle aims at the masses, local order interpretation of its images can provide a site of dissonance. As each image is a fragment of space and time, its meaning and use value depend on its slotting in the running order and the comprehension of the audience within their own world-view. The body of protesters enter the line of the audience's sight, forcing the public to look at them.

The banners they held: 'Damn the Beauty Pageant.'

The slogans they yelled: 'We want mother India, we don't want Miss India.'

And we all awaited the spectacle of burning bodies.

The cultural protesters, those who saw 'indecent' and 'everything indecent as un-Indian,'<sup>13</sup> rather than those who opposed on secular economic grounds the commodification of women and misplacement of resources, shared with the organisers an ecumenity of forms, particularly those associated with antiquity. There may have been differences in hue but essentially they were characterised by the same particular perception of Indian order. The cultural protesters disputed the vocabulary of the spectacle, but did not question the spectacle's reason to be, that is, the need for an image of India. This essential similarity allowed for the site of challenge to be carefully managed, containing the dissonance

within the vessel of the spectacle itself.

Take One:

Richard: '...the swimwear component of the competition has always caused something of a rumpus.'

Ruby: 'Rumpus?' (she asks quizzically).

Richard: 'A controversy, a stir. And this year has been no exception' (he says somberly).

Ruby: 'Oh but enough of that serious stuff (she says lightly and breezily), its been fun in the sun for our contestants....'

Take Two:

Ruby: 'Perhaps what you didn't know Richard is that in many areas dress is restricted by considerations of region, religion and caste. Tonight, however, our contestants have had no such restrictions on their attire.'

The dissonance is acknowledged, but the show must go on.

**T**he possibility of authentic local readings of the global order which filter mediated images, moves away from the concept of television as moving wall paper with an audience unable to link a chain of signifying concepts. The presence of contesting views in audience research carried out after the Miss World contest indicates that while a reality may be signified through recorded images within a hierarchical communication structure, it is not homogeneously understood, adopted or applied. If we can then move away from the notion of 'the masses', modernity's unit of analysis, it is possible to see order more pragmatically adopted by individuals as a series of social choices rather than mediated platonic ideals.

In this sense, in a self-reflexive moment perhaps, it is possible to say that the construction of Miss World is just the unconscious logic of the event.<sup>14</sup> But as part of the contemporary media landscape in India, it is in no way autonomous from social and economic developments in which the pre-eminent sense is 'seeing'. And while specificity exists, it is bounded, as is dissent, within the vessel of modernity's order.

14. From a conversation with D. R. Nagaraj.

12. Interviewed on the third of the six programme series, Godrej Gateway to Miss World, 26 October 1996, 2130, DD2.

13. Interview with P. Nesargi, BJP MLA, 14 November 1996, and M.K. Nanjundaswamy, KSFA, 30 November 1996.

# Tourism and the imperial gaze

ROSE DeNEVE

WHEN I first traveled to India in 1979, I was, like many first-time visitors, full of ideas about how India was to be seen and experienced. I had read many novels and travelogues written by westerners as well as by Indians. But, however much my head may have been filled with romantic, orientalist fantasies about India, most of these expectations had been constructed from *visual* texts – images built in my mind from descriptions of things seen and, more importantly, images directly infused from lavish picturebooks, travel-guide photography and tourist brochures produced by the Government of India.

As might be expected, that first trip to India produced the exotic experiences I was determined to see. In fact, it was only after many more years and many more visits to India that I began to understand tourism imagery as part of a much larger visual discourse about India dating to colonial times.

As windows on an actual world, visual representations seem to communicate reality. While literary texts use a series of verbal images to create what Roland Barthes has called a 'reality effect', visual images such as paintings, photographs and cinematic frames communicate their information at a glance. Although it may be said that modernist and post-modernist art comprises of less rationalized representations of an artist's view of the world, more naturalistic images – those created through a unified Renaissance perspective – provide a seeming continuum of space and depth. Such images collapse time and distance, re-presenting another place, another time, in the here-and-now. Such 'painted text',

as Dunning<sup>1</sup> calls works of this nature, 'presupposes, perhaps even "constructs", a specific kind of viewer... who stands in one specific location and visually extends a sense of self through a window-like transparent picture plane into an illusionistic pictorial space...'

However much a psychological manipulation, the ability of paintings, photographs, and other naturalistic representations to transport the viewer into an illusory world is neither a harmless exercise in fantasy nor an innocuous venture into captured reality. A viewer's serial yet disjointed encounters with individual drawings, paintings, or photographs (which, along with film, are the most convincing visual reality bites to date) tend to disguise the fact that, despite being products of individual points of view, visual representations are like written texts: They are always conceived within larger, culturally embedded systems of knowledge and meaning. Within such systems, visual imagery works to continually reaffirm a culturally accepted way of interpreting the world. As Salman Rushdie has observed, '(w)orks of art... do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; ... the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history.'<sup>2</sup>

The photographs of India that today adorn gallery walls, illuminate lavishly produced art books and illustrate count-

1. William Dunning, 'The Concept of Self and Post-Modern Painting: constructing a post-Cartesian viewer', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49/4:331-336 (1991), p. 332.

2. Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale', *American Film*, 10:4 (January-February) 1985, p.72.

less tourist promotions and travel guides are embedded in a narrative of travel and otherness that dates at least from the time of the 5th century Greek traveller Herodotus, whose *Histories* described and compared dozens of different cultures and built the model for centuries of future travelogues. Whatever the European point of origin for such wayfarers, the base of comparison was an assumed common European culture that was central and superior; other cultures were marked by varying degrees of aberration, or difference.

**W**hile Herodotus is reputed to have been more or less realistic in his presentations, later travellers were not always so reliable. Until the 16th century, few raconteurs were concerned with the accuracy of their accounts; stories were both 'factual' and allegorical, and it didn't matter if the line between the two became blurred. Accuracy was a matter of concern for scholars; for the general public, it was enough to hear and know about the marvellous – and terrible – places beyond the European pale. As travellers' stories were compiled, accounts became more and more fabulous. Writers borrowed freely from one another, choosing from a shared vocabulary and understanding of the world, filling in from others' accounts what they themselves had not seen. A few of these travelogues were translated into several European languages and assumed significant textual authority.

One such volume is particularly germane to a discussion of visual representations of India. If Europe was the center of civilization (a word used in the singular until the 18th century), then *Marvels of the East* was a veritable compendium of fable and lore about life at the margins of civilization; it served as a resource and reference for anyone undertaking a narrative about the easternmost edges of the world. The notion of 'East' itself was somewhat vague: it was less important as a particular place than as a place 'not here', an 'Elsewhere' where the grotesque could and did exist. According to *Marvels*, India was a land rich in gold which was mined from anthills. Its people

were diverse – some dot-headed, others with huge feet which also served as umbrellas; in southern India, they were cannibals. Accompanying the text – which described India as the farthest East and most Elsewhere – were copious and fantastic illustrations that offered visual proof of the otherness that was India.

By the early 18th century, European study and description of the Oriental as 'other' was beginning to be defined as the scholarly discipline of Orientalism. Within this discipline, individual fields such as Egyptology and Indology studied particular places and peoples. Of particular interest to such classical orientalists were antiquities, scriptures, languages and literatures, for in these, orientalists believed, were contained the secrets of a true oriental essence. Often, as in the case of India, such study revealed much to be admired by European scholars. In any event, the formalized knowledge produced by such scholars in India ultimately became the basis for British rule of the Indian subcontinent.

**I**t was this centuries-old orientalist legacy that professional British artists brought with them when they first arrived in India toward the close of the 18th century. As they travelled and sketched their way around the subcontinent, the orientalist construction of India as a land lost in antiquity, with peoples who were both backward and exotic, was well-matched with the artistic predilections of the Picturesque genre, which favored vast vistas, light-struck skies, crumbling ruins and quaint peoples. Moreover, there was in both their viewpoint and their paintings a sense of loss, of a longing for a simpler, more naturalistic life. As Nochlin<sup>3</sup> observes, the appeal and romance of all paintings of the Picturesque genre were in fact predicated on incipient destruction – of people and a way of life that belonged to earlier times. According to early British paintings, India was a place where incredibly luminescent landscapes were littered with the ruins of architectural monuments to a romantic past. Indians

were a colourful and exotic people stuck in time, in a world that was about to be altered forever by the very people who were painting them.

**B**ut professional artists were not the only ones to observe India's land and peoples through the eyes of European artistic tastes and conventions; they merely joined the ranks of various amateur artists already in British employ. Many British East India Company officials and army officers had received training in watercolour painting as part of their official education before going to India or at the Company's college in Haileybury. The more sensitive and intellectual of these often spent their leisure hours making drawings and paintings, including oils, of the Indian countryside wherever they were posted.<sup>4</sup> As Britain's commercial empire expanded across the subcontinent, more surveyors and artists made their way into the interior. Indeed, for efficient rule and expansion of both commerce and Empire, there was nothing like information gleaned by direct contact, observation, and quantification, and professional artists were certainly part of that empiricist effort, making 'the Indian world' visible and usable for British capitalism.

British paintings and drawings of India from the Picturesque period fall into two broad categories – landscapes and portraits. Both received enthusiastic reception among Britons in India. They also found wide appreciation in Britain, where a growing middle class was becoming enamoured with the idea of an Indian Empire. British artists usually came to India for a few years, travelled widely, and sketched and painted along the way. Works that were not sold in India were taken back to England, where they were transcribed into engravings for mass distribution and publication in travel books. It was these reproductions that defined how India looked for the mass of the

3. Linda Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient, politics of vision*, Harper and Row, New York, 1989.

4. A catalogue written by noted art historians Mildred Archer and Ronald Lightbown to accompany the Victoria and Albert Museum's 1982 exhibition of British paintings of India documents the activities of these artists in detail.

British population and brought the Picturesque interpretation of India into the realms of public culture and popular travel imagery.

**T**he first artist of renown to paint India was William Hodges (1744-97), who confessed to a fascination with the quality of Indian light and whose landscapes often used exaggerated proportions to enhance the emotional appeal of monuments and ruins. Following Hodges were the uncle and nephew team of Thomas (1749-1840) and William Daniell (1769-1837), who spent eight years traversing India, using a *camera obscura* to accurately outline picturesque Indian monuments. They travelled with a large retinue, making many drawings to be completed or turned into paintings later, at leisure. The duo not only produced many oils during their stay, but also built up a massive collection of drawings which permitted them to continue 'painting India' for the rest of their lives. Once back in England, 144 of their views were published in a renowned collection of aquatints entitled *Oriental Scenery*, whose popularity as collector's items continues today.

The influence of the Daniells and the Picturesque artists who followed (among them Charles D'Oyly, James Baillie Fraser, Lt. Colonel Charles Forrest, Ezekial Barton, and James Mason) on the popular understanding of India should not be underestimated. Their method of working and their completed artworks suggest that while architectural detail may have been more or less faithfully rendered, much that was atmospheric of a place called India was added later, from memory or imagination. This Picturesque atmosphere – achieved through the selection of romantic subject matter, a formal composition, the painterly play of light and shadow, and the inclusion of culturally recognized icons of India such as caparisoned elephants or turbaned peasants – soon came to define India in the larger European imagination.

It is important to note that Indians present in these early pictorials were generally rendered small, naturalized, as

if part of the landscape. Actual portraits of Indians produced during this same period were most often of *nawabs*, *rajahs*, or other members of Indian royalty, including courtiers. These paintings were popular among Britons for two reasons: their subject matter appealed to the European/orientalist taste for colourful costume and exotic raiment, and the princes themselves often paid the artist a handsome fee. Since portraying Indian women of good families was problematic (most kept *purdah* and most British painters were men), the Indian dancing girl came to stand for Indian womanhood, now essentialized into something both exotic and available.

However, paintings were also made of more common Indian folk. Indeed, following a concurrent trend in England in which artists travelled the countryside documenting various English 'types', artists like Arthur William Devis (1762-1822) scoured India and visually described a range of indigenous occupations, portraying weavers, braziers, potters and other natives in scrupulous detail. Such visual evidence of Indian life added weight to the drawings made by countless travellers, civil administrators and military officials, whose views and accounts of Indian village life in particular served as a basis of rule throughout the British period.

**T**hrough the first half of the 19th century, the East India Company pushed further up the Ganges and down the Deccan. By 1825 or so, the idea of India was beginning to lose some of its fascination for Britons' back home. More people were coming out to India and more people were already familiar with what India looked like. In addition, due to reforms in Company rule and the influx of more British women, British attitudes toward India were becoming less sympathetic. Finally, British policy toward Indians themselves was beginning to change.

But changes in the economic, social, and political circumstances of British rule did not significantly affect the way the British – and the rest of the

western world – saw and pictured India, for a visual reality called India had already been well defined. Moreover, its mechanical dissemination continued unabated. In Britain there grew a fascination with travel books whose narratives told tales of journeys through far away places. Drawings and paintings made in India between 1770 and 1825 now found publication as engravings and aquatints illustrating these works, as well as in various loose-leaf editions that were sold as series subscriptions. Through such works, armchair travellers stepped into the shoes, as it were, of the artist-traveller, sharing with him (for these artists were by and large males) the orientalist's imperial gaze. And through such works the larger population acquired 'knowledge' of what India and Indians looked like.

**W**ith the invention of the camera around 1840, photography became the medium of preference for official and amateur documentation of the world. Not insignificantly, its very mechanism incorporated the conventions of the Renaissance perspective already favoured by the naturalistic artists of the Picturesque. For India-watchers, the camera's unquestioned realism, and the ready acceptance of what it 'saw' as truth, put forth a particularly convincing view of an Indian reality. As concurrent trends in painting took artistic works into more abstract and impressionistic directions, the already accepted Picturesque conventions for visually representing India crystallized in this new medium.

Since that time photographers have continued to produce Picturesque images of India. British and other western travellers have continued to portray and document Indian people, places and historical events. Indians themselves have been part of this process, both as travelling photographers and as (presumably) willing subjects. What is most striking, perhaps, is how so many of those views – colonial and post-colonial, painterly and photographic, European and Indian – use the same Picturesque notions of light and composition, romance and timelessness,



to depict much the same Indian subject matter.

Given the circumstances of their production and use, it should perhaps come as no surprise that official views of India and its people produced by the Government of India today incorporate much the same orientaling strategies as did earlier British views. British subjugation of India included the colonizing of minds as well as territories and educated upper class Indians, into whose hands the departing colonizers delivered a newly independent India, had been schooled in British ways.<sup>5</sup> Their collaboration with the British rulers and their selective adoption of British customs and mores may have been aimed at securing their own positions in the ruling class of the emergent Indian state, but the effective internalization of European values by large numbers of Indians, and the subsequent promulgation of these values by the post-colonial state, have served to both perpetuate and recontextualize what were once colonialist practices.

**A**long one thread of this multi-stranded modern discourse, Indian officials (who are in large part still English-medium-educated members of the upper classes) produce photographs of their own traditional Others – tribals, ethnics, outcastes, and religious minorities – and the lands on which they live. Some of these views are made for purposes of information or surveillance, as in the collection of photographs of tribals and their villages by Indian sociologists and government workers; many more images are made to visually record and project India's ethnic diversity for the purposes of tourism.

Another strand of visual representation links the 'discovery', excavation, identification, and categorization of

Indian buildings and monuments by the British with the expansion of the British empire and with public works projects, the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and the incorporation of any number of disparate, multi-historied structures into a single, unified history of India.<sup>6</sup> Today, such structures are primary tourist sites/sights, embodying for both international and domestic travellers a kind of eternal essence that is generally recognized as India. More significantly, drawings and photographs of these buildings figure prominently in the historical development of popular tour guides, as well as in government marketing of travel to India.

**B**ut the images of tourism advertising are not just reiterations of Britain's pretty, if imperializing, pictures. Because of their wide dissemination in tourism literature and other forms of mechanical reproduction, touristic images also serve a larger, more nationalistic purpose. Many of the Indian tourism officials indicated that for them such images call forth the real strength and integrity of the Indian state. Not just an orientalist's nostalgia for a distant, glorious past, their sense of who they are as individuals and as a nation – their sense of Indianness, as one informant put it – dwells in the very stones of India's landscapes, in its historical buildings and monuments and in the customs of its traditional peoples. For them, the type of visual imagery commonly associated with tourism – whether or not it evolved from a more imperialistic time – most clearly communicates not only what tourists expect to see, but what India and Indians are all about, for Indians as well as for international travellers.

Clearly then, tourism and tourism imagery contribute to the larger project of Indian national integration. For a nation state with dozens of languages and dialects and a highly stratified economy, the idea of India as a historically integrated unit has great emotional appeal. From

dancing Orissi women to the massive desert forts of Rajasthan, from processions of caparisoned elephants to temples crowded along the Ganges, touristic imagery for many Indians seems to answer their government's call for unity in diversity. More important, because visual culture is so widespread and crosses boundaries raised by geography, class, and illiteracy, it serves to both capture and reflect something of the essence of the imagined community that is modern India.

Such visual representations, of course, are not unproblematic. Like the paintings produced by British artists during the colonial period, contemporary views of India are likely to be produced by members of privileged classes and predicated on incipient destruction: exotic, traditionalized peoples who so neatly oppose westernized upper class Indians are often the very target of mainstreaming development schemes devised by the state. In addition, touristic images tend to hide the presence of the modernity that already exists in India. As early paintings often did not include a British presence, contemporary touristic images seldom include westernized Indians, much less the factories, roads, power plants, or other evidence of the modern India they have built. Just as early British paintings masked the violence perpetrated against India and her peoples in the name of empire, so too these newer images hide the oppression and poverty experienced by those Others who have been consigned to the margins of Indian society.

**D**espite the fact that roads, radios, satellite television, education, political campaigns and emigration link rural India with urban centers and with the rest of the world, touristic imagery continues to represent all Indians as time-bound and untouched by modern civilization. Finally, whatever their stated purpose, touristic images too easily lead viewers toward a romanticized Picturesque understanding of India, away from the larger intersections of global capitalism, international tourism and a bureaucratic state that also constitute their frames.

5. For a significant number of Indian artists, education meant emulating the artistic tastes of their British masters, using perspective and shading in the European manner. Such artists were often commissioned by the East India Company to portray social phenomena such as costume and lifestyle, as well as buildings and monuments. Thus, in a more formalistic way, European artistic conventions, as well as Picturesque sensibilities, entered the community of Indian artists.

6. For a scholarly and highly readable account of British projects involving Indian art and architecture, see John Keay, *India Discovered*. Collins, London, 1988.

# The market life of Amar Chitra Katha

NANDINI CHANDRA

AMAR Chitra Katha (ACK hereafter) or the Classics Illustrated re-tell through the comic medium the deeply entrenched stories of a pan-Indian Hindu past as recorded by the 19th century orientalist/nationalist historiography. Their avowed agenda is to preserve 'the glorious national heritage' and spread cultural values among the deracinated urban youth. In the present essay, I shall see how these pictorial re-appropriations are a bid to renew the appeal of the 'timeless', and also how their packaging is inflected with traces that are completely underpinned by who it is that packages and to whom it is addressed. My focus, therefore, will be on the production and marketing strategies of ACK as it operates within the cultural industry.

As a cultural 'good' or 'commodity', I will also examine ACK's role in disseminating certain images and icons which are immediately identified with the nation. In contrast with the gods and goddesses of calendar art, I will see in what ways the comic medium is responsible for de-sacralising the images such that the transition from Hindu to national

seems almost natural. To this end, my essay will probe into the role of ACK as children's literature, its involvement in pedagogical praxis and the shifts in public policies over the two decades of its production – from 1970 to 1991. I shall also examine the role of its founder editor Anant Pai in defining its creative agenda.

ACK is a product of the capitalist mode of production even though 'it pretends to put the law of self-interest into abeyance' and pretends to be 'playing for stakes' that are non-material and not easily quantified. To mask its commodity identity, it is sold under the banner 'India Book House Education Trust' instead of 'India Book House Pvt. Ltd.', the original name of the company. In addition, it is marked by the spirit of gift exchange characteristic of most children's literature, since in all but a few cases it is bought by parents for children: often sold as a collector's item – 'give your child a gift he'll treasure forever.' Amarnad, the voice of the ACK series in the form of audio-cassettes and LP records, is marketed as bringing 'enter-

tainment into education'. The notional educative function of ACK is thus defined in terms of the dominant service industry. Education then becomes no more than a knowledge bank, data to be processed according to the needs of the media, the market and the audience. It also becomes a means for converting the child into a 'national resource'.

Children, the consumers, are nevertheless seen as distinct from parents, the buyers. While the child is seduced by the 'fun' involved in the comics, the parents are persuaded that fun would enhance the educative potential of these comics. For example, the combination of mythology, legend and history which ACK sells, itself approximates to the general knowledge that is an imperative for competitive exams like the UPSC.

Just as Pai adapted a certain kind of information to the comic medium in the '60s, he is willing to package the same material for video, audio-visual, multimedia and CD Rom systems in the '90s. Thus, ACK not only identified, but also shaped and classified its potential consumers – youth markets aligned to the latest technological gizmos, brought up in an urban set-up and roughly in the age group 8-14.

In contrast to the inert and flat icons of calendar art and Hindu posters, ACK projects a dynamic narrative that propels the action, frame by frame. According to Barthes, the comic medium with its continuity pictures is more akin to the film medium. While the photographic image is related to 'a more spectatorial consciousness,' the film medium has 'a more projective, more magical fictional consciousness.' The historicizing impulse of the comic medium thus helps in de-stilling the icons; desecralising them in the process. However, the comic medium in ACK is not completely liberated from the sacred principle of its Hindu themes. It is marked by constant oscillation between the iconicity index and the narrativising index. Therefore, it is impossible to fix upon the sacredness of ACK stories.

This diffusion of the sacred into domains of the secular is further achieved

by two kinds of linguistic messages that attach to the comic picture text – the anchorage and the relay texts. While the anchorage text 'directs the reader through the signified of the image causing him to avoid some and receive others, ...towards a meaning chosen in advance', the relay text is no more than 'a scratch of a dialogue complementary to the image'. While the former corresponds to the overt ideology, the latter is a tactic to advance the action. But both are means through which the polysemous myth/image text is subdued and manipulated.

In *Tales of Durga*, for example, while the word bubble deploys Durga in her angry, militaristic avatar, the imagery undermines this role, by presenting her face as suffused in a warm and benign light even as she goes about demolishing demons. The myth has lost its historical consciousness even as it enacts that history. This suppression of the traces of production, of what ACK terms 'glorious heritage' under 'a self-evident appearance of eternity', constitutes the essence of revivalism.

The comic medium's need for action is also fulfilled by the ACK titles on revolutionary nationalist heroes such as Bagha Jatin, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, among others. These comics are populated with bombs, Mauser guns, German submarines, smuggling of firearms, frantic get-aways, hide-outs, chases, disguises and scenes of martyrdom played out in action-packed death scenes. These are further woven into a morality tale whose lesson is courage. This valorization of a militant ideology has an insidious sub-text when one considers the fact that Gandhi and Nehru are completely sidelined, acknowledged in the ACK only in its penultimate titles. To add insult to injury, these titles are verbose and dull due to no other reason than, perhaps the fact that the depiction of moderate tactics such as dialogue and satyagraha do not make for exciting pictures.

According to Nicholas Garnham, 'the cultural process is as much about creating audiences or publics as it is about

producing cultural artifacts and manances.' Moreover, 'since one use-values of culture is novelty and difference, there is a constant need to create new products which are all in a sense prototypes.' The resultant drive for novelty also means that in general, cost of reproduction is marginal in relation to the cost of production. But the returns on every subsequent copy is also marginal. So the only way to make profit is to expand the audience base. Audience maximization is thus ACK's mode of profit maximization.

ACK's formative years were marked by this trend. Its readership constituted a wide cross-section of the domestic market, cutting across regional and caste lines. This required subtle negotiations with a complex set of differential institutions – the bourgeois democratic state, the publishing industry, the educational apparatus, various minority communities and political representations. To avoid the risk of investing in a single product, ACK spread its cultural material over a range of products, which in turn were spread across various other media (LP records, audio cassettes and so on) as well as a heterogeneity of titles.

Every region was represented, or titles assorted as an afterthought to cash in on a political situation. For example, the disparate Sikh titles were assembled in the early '80s as a mark of tribute to a Sikh separatist identity – or so it would seem. But in effect, the idea was to show the Sikh as part of the Hindu family, and anti-Muslim to boot. This project of co-option was not reserved for the Sikhs alone, but involved diverse minority communities such as the Buddhists, Jains, Dalits, in fact everybody except the Muslims. The Hindu Vedantin ideal of a monotheistic, transcendental God presented it with a model of secularism which was premised upon a theme of 'toleration' that had 'historically included absorption, subjugation and marginalisation of other religious minorities.' At heart, therefore, it concealed a grand plan of exclusion; of 'othering' anything that challenged its Brahminism and caste hierarchy.

Under the guardianship of its founding genius, Anant (Uncle) Pai and his motto *Satyam Bruyat, Priyam Bruyat; Na Bruyat Satyam Apriyam; Priyam cha asatya na Bruyat* (Speak the truth that is pleasant, Do not speak the truth that is unpleasant and do not speak it if it is untrue, just because it is pleasant), ACK deployed a range of insidious and subtle tactics to cover an expanding audience base, even as it addressed them unequally.

**A**s far as statist assumptions of secularism go, ACK is ambiguously aligned to them. While it has little problem with religious pluralism, it is opposed to the legal protection of minority rights. As Pai remarked: Arjun Singh wanted to ban Sanskrit from Kendriya Vidyalayas on the grounds that if we teach Sanskrit we would have to teach Persian and Arabic as well. That is the height of stupidity our leaders can go to.... You see, right from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, though there were different kings ruling, it was one India or 'Akhand Bharatam'. Whether the rituals are performed in Bengal or Kerala the standard mantras are the same.

The desire is to replace the bourgeois democratic state with a Brahmin theocratic, one where 'the standard mantras' will be the same. This nostalgia for the past is not only underwritten with a feudal ideology, but its representations are inscribed with a blueprint for a future utopia that derives its legacy and profit from the bourgeois state and industrial capital. ACK stories are consequently framed by a couple of advertisements. These reflect the political and economic temper of the times. In the early '70s and '80s they were dominated by swadeshi entrepreneurship. At the turn of the '80s the winds of liberalisation were becoming evident. At the same time an 'Indian Thatcherism' that Vanaik uses to convey the tension between a privileged nation within the nation and the less privileged one, was also operative.

This tension gradually disappeared as economic liberalisation became a full-blown reality. The less privileged nation was either left to fend for itself or was converted into a spectacle that provided

exotic relief against consumer commodities. But in the ACKs of the mid-1970s to the early '80s, the world-view was still a moderate one with an accent on thrift and security as evidenced by the cautionary consumerism of the advertisements. A majority of them are for patent food stuffs – brands that became household names through the '70s – Cadbury's gems, Parle's poppins, Dipy's jams and squashes and Ravalgaon sweets. The other section is devoted to saving schemes in various banks for young people, pointing the way towards their economic independence and secure future. The minor's account in the Overseas Bank enables Meena to be 'the proudest girl in class', because she pays for the trip to Kashmir from her own pocket.

**I**n the Canara Bank ad, all that the parent has to do is to collect the loose change from everyday purchases and deposit it in the Canara Bank saving box. This box is called a TV and is shaped like one, perhaps as a substitute for the real TV set that is absent from middle class homes. Small change is not yet outdated and thrift is still a virtue. Again, the Maltova Gang are a set of do-gooders, Enid Blyton style, getting bright ideas for the summer vacation, rescuing people from tight spots and springing a surprise birthday party on Dheeru, the boy from the orphanage who never smiles. One can even become a member of their exclusive Maltova group (not the gang, sorry) by simply sending jar labels or inner seals from Maltova packs. While the Maltova gang exhibits a sympathetic cognisance of the lesser other, this sympathy is diluted by the imperative to subscribe to Maltova drinks and, if possible, seduce the other to its charmed fold.

ACKs market tactics, particularly in the field of comics and children's literature in general, were pretty effective. It spawned several publishing ventures under the India Book House Education Trust banner. Understanding Science, Echo Books, Chaturang Katha, Let us know India, are some of them. At the same time it held distribution rights for some of the major international comic titles.

On 1 September 1984, IBH Pvt. Ltd. released Laurel and Hardy, Superman, Super Spy James Bond and Amitabh Bachchan as Supremo under the banner of Star Comics.

Speaking about his sales tactics, Pai says, 'I had restricted promotion to conducting quiz contests on Indian history and culture (over 150 contests held so far), one-act play contests, elocutions, fancy dress and mask colouring contests, but the publishers of Diamond comics gradually won the children over by catering to their need for adventure and slap-stick humour.' Pai goes on to quote Diamond comics publishers as admitting that while they were nowhere close to ACK as far as quality, style and content was concerned, but it was their strategy of flooding the market with ten titles a month, followed by aggressive salesmanship and innovative promotional techniques that paid rich dividends.

The picture painted is one of ACK's sophistication and superior ideals versus the cheap tactics indulged in by the ruthless Diamond comics. While ACK appears to genuinely care for children, Diamond comics limits itself to profit and apparently this is where ACK's commitment to engage with pedagogical praxis comes through.

**T**his was evident in a seminar on 'The role of Chitra Katha in School Education' organised by India Book House Education Trust on 14 February 1978. An experiment was carried out in the top 30 Delhi schools to show that students retained a better knowledge of history through ACK than through textbooks. But despite the outcome of the project and the seal of approval it got from the Ministry of Education, NCERT and the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, ACK did not become curricula material in Indian schools.

The idea was to appropriate the credibility of pedagogic textbooks representing the 'received' statist perspectives and propagate its rival claim to exclusive cultural truth. The opening frames of the comic on Rash Behari Bose show the boy Rash Behari in a history classroom, resenting every word the teacher uttered.

Teacher: The people of Bengal have little courage.... That is why Baktiar Khilji could conquer Bengal with only 17 cavalry men. Rash Behari challenges the teacher by asserting that there were 'more men'. This corrective results in his expulsion from school. Even though the comic does not inform us as to the source of Rash Behari's information, it invests it with authority because of the 'price' he is made to pay. The teacher is converted into a villain – a Muslim looking one at that. He has a beard minus a moustache, a standard representation in ACKs for distinguishing Muslims from non-Muslims.

**T**his exclusive cultural truth, however, has two faces – while it extols the tradition of gurukuls in *Aruni and Uttanka*, it valorizes irreverence for the teacher-figure in *Rash Behari Bose*. Also, its promise of 'screening each word and each picture' because they have a lasting impact on impressionable minds fails if it is an attempt to shield the child from unnecessary depiction of violence and sex. On the one hand, Pai's abhorrence towards superstition leads him to refuse publishing issues on Santoshi Ma, Manasa Devi, Satyanarayana and others on the ground that they represent 'a degradation of Hinduism' (despite guaranteed sales); on the other, irrational Puranic myths constitute more than half of the ACK corpus. The reason why the above Gods are singled out as unfit for being part of the ACK pantheon is not only because they are 'punitive' but because they emerged after the 10th century, which according to Pai is a date conclusive of the influence of Islam.

ACK usually follows a policy of appeasement, doling out concessions to the minority communities with a sleight of hand as it were. For issues in which the Sikhs feature, it appointed a specialist on Sikh beards and sent its scripts and illustrations to the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee, Amritsar for approval, all in order to avoid the possibility of censorship.

Most Dalit saints are made to enunciate a high Vedantin theology held in esteem by many neo-elite neo-Kshatriyas

such as the Birlas, whose charitable Trust underwrote the publication of the script for Pai's videotape *Ekam Sat*. This explains the odd-ball issue on G.D. Birla, the only industrialist to feature in ACK. Similarly, in the ACK issue on Chokha Mela, the brahmin priest of Pandharpur hogs the limelight with his anguished soul-searching, after he had assaulted Chokha. The tremendous networking of ACK marketing management becomes apparent when *Chokha Mela* was released in the thick of caste riots that broke out in Aurangabad. Pai recruited the services of Buta Singh, a Dalit leader, to release the comic. He also organised 'Abhang' singing contests to spread the message of social amity. The first prize, unerringly, went to a brahmin boy.

As far as Buddhist and Jain tales are concerned, attempts to Hinduize them are rampant – populating them with Hindu gods, downplaying their status as separate religions, and interchanging their philosophy with the ambience of the tantrik Vajrayana sect characterised by bloody sacrificial and erotic-mystical rituals as in *Malati and Madhava*. As the authors of *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* state: 'Pluralism is made into a spectacle through a process of co-option which never spells out the grounds for appropriation. Nowhere is the accent on non-ahimsa, the cardinal principle of both Jainism and Buddhism.'

**A**round the mid-1980s, the country went in for a greater liberalisation of the economy and promotion of tie-ups between indigenous capital, multinationals and NRIs. It was the distinctively Hindu complexion of the NRI that was the turning point in ACK marketing strategies and its eventual decision to stop production of new titles in 1991.

An NRI paper, 'Hinduism Today', (April 1995 issue) carried a feature on the search by NRI parents for Hindu books for their children. The search ends in ACKs. Similarly, Suruchi Bhandaar, the RSS bookshop in Jhandewala, is stacked with ACKs. It is obvious that the secular channels built by ACK have been appropriated for strictly 'Hindu' or communal causes.

The mid-1980s were dominated by the publication of special issues like the *Dashavatara*, deluxe bound volumes of threes and tens, mini series based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. All these special issues in effect re-packaged the older stuff, designed with a Hindu accent for a more affluent market. The mini-series on the Mahabharata (42 issues) was launched in March 1985 to coincide with the telecast of the serial on Doordarshan. The accompanying advertisement read – 'Read it to enjoy your Sunday viewing'.

**T**here was a slide in ACK sales from a record million copies in 1981 to 28,000 copies in September 1992, the market for ACK having peaked in 1986-87. The loss in sales is attributed to the TV and video boom. This could hardly be a serious reason as not only did the TV serials borrow from ACKs for a comprehension of the visual codes – costumes, sets and so on – but the two media mutually reinforced each other instead of promoting conflicting views. Of course, the TV version's translation of ACK into a medium with a greater mass appeal and cultural hegemony also vulgarised it and catapulted it into the realm of high-tech consumerism.

Thus, even as the ACK content remained the same (however dubious and antiquarian), it was challenged by the emergence of a new aggressive social-class mobilised by the forces of Hindutva to re-package itself. Also, the new titles printed in the mid-1980s were increasingly at the mercy of groups and trusts which had commissioned them. For example, the series on the Indian National Congress was commissioned by the Congress Party to mark its centenary in 1985. The rights for the regional language ACKs were sold to local publishing houses. IBH printed and distributed only the English language comics whose covers were turned into glossies. The prices too were considerably higher as compared to the regional language ACKs. Presently the English ACK is sold for Rs 20, whereas its counterpart distributed by Diamond comics in Hindi sells for Rs 10. At the



same time the Editor's Choice, a selection of 100 titles, mainly mythologies, was brought out after 1991, the closing date of ACK production. Reprints are made only from these selected 100. This has further narrowed the ACK corpus, thereby emphasising its Hinduness.

Not only was the NRI market a profitable diversion channel for ACKs, but the loss of its sales after 1986-87 were absorbed by 'Tinkle', launched in January 1980 with the purpose of making education enjoyable. It was given an overtly secular and participative edge as if to make up for ACKs lack on both counts. ACKs 'Tinkle' is reputed to be the highest selling English language magazine for children in the country today.

With the new legitimacy granted to it by the forces of Hindutva, ACK no longer feels the need to keep up with its original pretense, that of spreading integrationist values on the terms of the heterogeneous domestic market. Not only has the market been segmented into NRI sales + local distribution network; it has also been homogenised such that it does not need to be negotiated.

**T**he ACK style national integration entails a definitive mode of recording myths, repressing their polysemous texture in order to relay a single monolithic message. At the level of imagery too, it has its politics of aesthetic codes as evident in the subsumption of different styles – miniature, mural and sculptural – into the hegemonic western representational style.

The pictorial codes that have gone into the layering of the visual national popular consciousness of ACK are many and varied. The main inspiration is derived from the 19th century Hindu iconography of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings and the more recent drawings of artists like Deenanath Dalal, Mulgaonkar, S.N. Pandit. But as Ram Waerker, one of the foremost illustrator of ACK reveals, this iconography has been buttressed by current discourses in film, advertising, TV, western comic strips and so on. On one hand, ACK drawings attempt to suppress these borrowings, claiming indigenous

inspiration; on the other they confine indigenous inspiration, stylization and cartooning effects to the Panchatantra, Jataka kathas and folktales.

**A**ccording to Pai, the naturalistic style à la Ravi Verma alone can represent the past as it was, without mediation. A stylistic picturisation is likely to lower its historical authenticity. Ironically for ACK, its patriotism which depends on collective identities like caste and religion, by giving primacy to the western oil painting technique, is forced to return to the domain of individual subjectivity enshrined in this mode of art. Not only is the focus on one or two main characters, but the gaze is further arrested by the foregrounding of the head (face vs the body). This suits the animation requirements of the comic medium, enabling it to mobilize the story by means of a few facial expressions.

Further, the pictures are in boxes, unlike the unbroken vista offered by Indian painting. While 'a certain mobility informs the spatial structure' in Indian paintings, 'that allows the eye to travel in multiple directions,' the European academic style makes for passive viewing. The action depicted in a single frame of ACK would be incomplete without the sequence. The language of individual subjectivity and hero worship of course squares well with a bourgeois audience.

The resultant concept of nation as enshrined in ACK thus overlaps between two shared interests and two sets of hierarchies. What masquerades as 'novel', 'different' and 'plural' can actually fit under the bourgeois genre of biography. So much so that the nation itself is identified in terms of an individual's inspiring life history. The fact that the primary identity between hero and child audience is one based upon religion is what defines the nation in ACK. By subsuming the contradictions of class, caste and gender under a false heterogeneity of titles drawn from history, mythology and legend, the ACK charts a cultural course that does not relate in any way to the real conditions of existence in which the child who is not addressed by ACK lives.

# Popular romances

URMI A. GOSWAMI

'After ten long and lonely years, the irrepressible Jared Tremayne was not only back but living next door, as he had always been. Petra thought she had made it clear that she had seen everything that could possibly be of interest to her as far as Jared was concerned. Yet he continued to pester her, and there seemed no end to his determination. How would it all end...?'

SCORES of readers, ranging from teenage girls to middle-aged women, will journey with Petra from page 1 to page 189, knowing fully well how it will all end. This book belongs to the genre of women's popular romance such as the Mills & Boon (for the sake of brevity and as convenient short-hand the entire genre of popular romance will be referred to as the Mills & Boon). The wide readership, and hence popularity of the Mills & Boon (henceforth MB) is in ways remarkable and strange, because as a prototype of the written text and even as representative of the genre of love stories, it is probably the worst and the most simplistic of its kind.

As a matter of fact, MBs have the distinction of exemplifying every bias that a politically correct person would decry. In spite of this its readership crosses the age and educational barrier. It even manages to bridge the political gap, being probably the one text which can claim to be read by both 'feminists' and 'housewives' (both terms are used in a limited and caricatured manner, though they serve as useful representative categories). The majority of the readers are women (I do know of a few men who confess to have partaken of this genre but they are a rarity).

The MB could be described as a text which enshrines the dominant ideology as experienced/enunciated in the West. The stories are always located geographically in the West, i.e. west Europe, America and Australia/New Zealand, and therefore deal with values that are considered as desirable there. This dominant ideology

is necessarily conservative in the broadest sense, in that it seeks and strives to maintain itself and the status of those in power. But it is also conservative in a more specific sense, identifying and perpetuating a narrow range of the 'correct' choices in political, economic, sexual, familial and other spheres of life. In view of the temporal and moral location of the MB, one could conclude that it is an Eurocentric text (though the MB is also oriented to America and Australia, it continues to be Eurocentric as it has strong leanings towards the European or that originating in Europe). Therefore its dominant ideology works primarily in the interests of the white, heterosexual, Christian, middle and upper middle class adult men and its features include the veneration of industrial capitalism, individualism, the traditional nuclear family, heterosexual romance and white racism.

The MB reinforces this dominant ideology through the various biases that it considers integral to its narrative, biases that run the entire gamut of possibilities. The text has been traditionally sexually biased (forget about a gay MB, even gay characters are unheard of in an MB!), racially tilted towards Eurocentrism (no Black or Asian protagonists, they are always European, preferably west and southern European or of some European strain. There is the Arab – the token effort to be politically correct – who must have some gentile blood to offset his pagan heritage. The protagonists are without fail Christians. As regards the female protagonists, they are invariably WASPS).

The patriarchal nature of this genre is obvious from the very gendered division of the public domain: clearly demarcated into the male and female. Certain job roles are male while others are female. The hot-favourite occupation for women is that of a secretary (though women also

opt for the more traditional male careers, more often than not they do so in a bid to seek approval of some male character other than the hero). In the event they are entrepreneurs, they seem to almost always need a male hand. The hero then comes across like the liberator who will free the heroine from her present preoccupations in order that she may pursue more feminine roles. Men on the other hand are, without fail, self-made even when they are scions of wealthy families. The MB as a representative of the category of popular romances reinforces, reconstitutes and reconfirms patriarchy. Notice that the woman always falls in line with the hero and she is, no matter what turns her script takes, a conformist. She conforms to the patriarchal notion of a woman: a nurturer in need of protection.

**T**he MB is marked by the male gaze. The narrative, though authored mostly by women (barring a few male writers, who use female pseudonyms), from supposedly a woman's point of view, is always written from a male perspective. Simply put, the woman is conceived through male understanding of womanhood, that is in terms of societal trends as reflected in a hall of mirrors. The MB eulogizes a certain kind of woman but this eulogy is only apparent in as much as the woman is trapped by this very same hall of mirrors. The use of the analogy of mirrors seems apt because in ways the MBs replicate ideas and notions which prevailing societal set-ups accept and applaud. The MB then becomes an unlikely social investment.

The MB, it could be said, is a questionable narrative which feminists have attempted to problematize in order to uncover ways in which patriarchy is regrouped and reinforced through this popular genre. I will step out of this paradigm which seeks to analyze the textual genre vis-a-vis patriarchy, opting instead to work within a framework which seeks to posit the MB in relation to what women really want. While I appreciate these kinds of feminist interventions and their role in demystifying patriarchal instruments, I would argue that these interventions do

not address the question of women's desire and their wish fulfilment via the MB.

It is said, and quite correctly, that patriarchy/dominant ideology is reinforced through these powerfully institutionalized texts (the MB could be thought of as an institution), and therefore the need to look anew at what lies behind the MBs. The issue then becomes why books which are so obviously flawed appeal even to critical readers.

**T**he current feminist paradigm is unable to address the issue of popularity of the genre primarily because its focus is centred on the narrative which treats life as told in stories which are serially arranged and chronologically vocalized, all moving singularly towards the crescendo of male acceptance (love) and social acceptance (marriage). Thus, they seek to unravel the rhetoric alone in order to question the ideals.

The MB reader does not read the narrative per se, so the variant story details are largely unimportant. What attracts the reader is the form of the genre. Thus the MB reader is not really a *reader* but a *consumer*. As consumers, they seek to partake of a piece of that notion of ultimate contentment that the MB form delivers. There are no readers of the narrative, which is eclipsed by the form, only consumers of the form itself. The form is marked by linear progression towards resolution, that is, it moves in a singular direction from apparent or obvious discord towards a resolution. The form is therefore marked by perfect closure, as if there is perfect resolution. The narrative may change, but that is incidental. What makes the narrative mundane and incidental is its formulaic nature.

If the MB is understood as a vehicle for reinforcing accepted values, then it needs to be acknowledged that the target audience is most often the western woman who may share these accepted values; if not, must have been socialized to accept them. The MB promotes a certain set of patriarchal values, the manifestations of which would definitely be different in the Indian scenario. If the western reader is primarily a consumer of the form, then the

Indian reader positioned at a geographical and moral distance from the originating source of this form of the dominant ideology, becomes even more of a consumer of the form than the western reader.

The title of the MB, the cover, and the blurb, all a part of the mini narrative, is only used as bait, encapsulating within it the form. Take two typical examples of such titles: 'Original Sin', or 'Something Old, Something New'. The blurb titillates: "'You will be my sex slave...!'" Emily should have turned tail and run as soon as she heard those words.' But she does not, and neither does the consumer put down the MB. Likewise, how could Lily Alexander marry her fiancé, Randall Carver (a placid lawyer!) when her 'furiously sexy husband' Saige, refuses to let her go. Saige does not even let the reader go, who is as taken up with the 'dangerous adventurer' as Lily is. Emily/Lily/reader are all seduced. Seduction all around.

**W**hat takes place is a double seduction. The hero seduces the heroine. 'But she felt on fire all over as his casual gaze moved slowly, assessingly, from the top of her copper-blond head, down over her wide brown eye to the petite curves of her breasts under the silk camisole... she felt, to her acute chagrin... (her) response to that challenging appraisal.' The consumer, who has already been sold desire in the blurb, is now being seduced by the form. And not too subtly either. Half way down the book, Emily succumbs. The rest of the book is then a journey to the happily ever after marriage. The hero uses his charm, wealth, dangerous good looks/furiously sexy looks, dynamic personality, power, to seduce the heroine – be it Emily/Lily/X/Y/Z. The hero, as the mouth-piece of the form, has to simultaneously seduce the consumer.

The form seduces by enchanting, much like the hero who enchants the heroine. The consumer seeks to recreate for herself the enchanted world of the fairy tales. No longer a child, real life in some form or the other has taken over the consumer, who then seeks to create a world which, though akin to real life, has fairy

tale resolutions. The MB then is a slice of life with all its trials, tribulations, even the joys packaged in fairy tale wrappings. The form of these two narrative are rather similar: man meets woman; they fall in love/period of resolution of desires; prince meets princess; they fall in love; intervention by circumstance/misunderstandings; clearing of misunderstanding; intervention by wicked relatives; vanquishes evil forces; resolution in marriage; lives happily ever after.

**W**hile the seven dwarfs and their antics may thrill a child, and a child alone may believe that toads and beasts can turn into princes; the adult and the young adult fail to be moved by these instances of magic. Cinderella or Snow White are characters far removed from their lives, neither carrying any emotional baggage (if they did we did not know about it). Or can one imagine a Cinderella whose family goes bankrupt or is preoccupied with the loss of a job. Impossible. The charm of the fairy tale is the magic, the enchantment. The MB then tries to recapture that enchantment without jeopardizing the identification process. So the female protagonist always faces obvious problems like unpaid bills, no job, a vile relationship with an ex-spouse/parent/relative.

The consumer is able to identify herself with the protagonist, not merely because of the problems, but because of the class from which she hails (the western reader, who is the intended audience, is largely from the middle and upper middle classes; the Indian reader too belongs to these sections). The MB form replicates the fairy tale, when the male protagonist, 'a prince among men', comes into the life of the heroine, thus moving inexorably towards resolution. If Cinderella felt physical attraction/desire, or was confronted with an awareness of her feminine self, we do not know of it. But like most consumers, the MB heroine plays out a role somewhat akin to real life, thereby making her more human and thus an identifiable category with which the consumer can seek identification.

The emotional baggage of the hero (which allows for the discord and its

ultimate resolution) and the heroine are key features of this form. The consumer sympathizes with this baggage, their trials and tribulations. The geographical and other such details are incidental to the consumer. Being caught up in that happily ever after ending of the fairy tale, the consumer seeks the perfect resolution offered in the MB, much like that offered by the formula Hindi film.

The enchantment trap is never broken out of as it represents not merely an escape route from real life but also a wish, which life, no matter how rosy, can never offer, that of never-ending bliss and happiness. Most narrative forms can be classified as escape texts; this particular form even more so. The consumer, from the word go, is trapped into a two-dimensional world where everything is either black or white, and what seems like grey will eventually resolve into either black or white. The MB offers a certain surety, one that life definitely does not – that all problems or potential problems will be resolved and the inherent and underlying goodness of the protagonists will ultimately triumph. Because what seems like a deviation from the norm is actually a temporary aberration – a result of life's trials and tribulations which eventually shall be overcome. This is a world in which nothing will go wrong and when it does it will be resolved. It drives home the widely held belief that love not only conquers all but also triumphs.

**T**his form seduces the consumer. Its seductive ability lies in the instrument of perfect and therefore irrevocable closure. In real life, not only is there no perfect resolution of lives (incidents yes, but the MB represents lives), there is no possibility of perfect closure. The notion of how one cannot escape one's past is what is at some level crucial for not allowing for closure.

The form continues to entrap us, for while it enchants it also pleases. Once entrapped, we slide from one trap (the enchantment trap) into another – the fantasy trap. Considering that there is no standard consumer profile, this form has then to be flexible enough to accommo-

date multiple sets of consumers. The MB starts with real life (or what is akin to it) and then strips it of all problems and angularities. The stylized real is then packaged as a fantasy designed to enchant its consumer/reader. The resemblance to the real, which the MBs retain, creates an impression – the reader/consumer gets a slice of real life. The MB begins with the real, fantasizes and serves it, still keeping a veneer of reality.

**T**his slippage ensures that the consumer is hooked on to the dream world of MBs. To the young adult this form is representative of the forbidden, the unknown, the opposite sex and the more mysterious and untrammelled terrain of the relationship with the opposite sex. It almost serves to unlock a whole new world for them. 'What were you supposed to do when the man you were in love with didn't even seem to realise you were female, let alone that you had lustful feelings towards him?'

More insidiously, of course, it sets up in the young mind a certain framework of what a man-woman relationship ought to be. The portrayal, with all its disappointments, provides for the women a happy escape route. Worse, it creates in the minds of women the notion of what an ideal man should be. It traps life in the fantasy land by unconsciously compelling men to follow certain set and pre-conceived standards. The potential harm apart, the MB provides an outlet for pent-up desires, dreams and hopes.

'And if he left off dreaming about you where do you suppose you'd be?'

'Where I am now, of course,' said Alice.

'Not you,' Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you are only a sort of thing in his dream.'

'If that king was to wake,' added Tweedledum, 'you'd go out. Bang! Just like a candle!'

But Alice was real, for the king continued to dream. The Mills & Boon romances are real in the dreams of their consumers/readers. They, like the king, never cease to dream.

# Cool, cool beverage

KRISTY BRIGHT

THE summer of 1996 brought several high profile news items to the Delhi press: the Parliamentary elections, continuing investigations on the *hawala* scam, the Personal Point triple-murder case, the mad cow disease controversy. Some readers may also remember last summer as the launch of Pepsi-Cola's 'Cool, Cool Summer' campaign and the introduction of Pepsi drink cans.

In the wake of the World Cup and Pepsi's 'Nothing Official About It' campaign, flashy ads in the Delhi press urged us to 'Junk the sun. Have fun. Party on with Pepsi' while we used our 'cool currency' from bottle caps to cash in on T-shirts, baseball caps and Daler Mehndi music tapes. One advertisement from C.J.'s Disco at Le Meridien exclaimed, 'What's as beautiful as a chilled, fizzy Pepsi on a hot Friday night? ...The Essar Ghungroo Miss Ten '96 Beauty Pageant!' Then, just as we thought we'd seen the coolest of the cool, Pepsi showed its warm, humanitarian side. Company representatives assisted residents' associations in putting up colony guide maps – colourful layouts of Greater Kailash I and II, Sheik Sarai and Nizamuddin West emblazoned with the Pepsi logo. Then I read how residents could put up these boards only after they purchased a certain number of soft-drink crates.

What is cool about cold drinks? Billboard depictions of icy beverages create a powerful skyline in a city where

the mercury sometimes climbs to 50 degrees. Here I am interested in the cultural production of thirst: 'cool' thirst as well as real thirst. Real thirst needs water. But cool thirst belongs to cool people, especially heroic people like sports-figures, film stars, people who work out in gyms and drive around in Hondas in the hot, hot sun. These people need something more sassy than water, preferably in a can.

Shiv Visvanathan makes the argument that as cultural actors, we have lifestyle and then we have style of life. Lifestyle may only afford water on a 50 degree Delhi day. But style of life yearns for the trendy and mobile capital of a Pepsi cool can. Lifestyle is concerned with immediate thirst while style of life seeks out the disco or cinema hall and then feels thirsty. Discos and cinemas are already pretty cool (they are air-conditioned); but then thirst carries an extra-added valence in these spaces. Bodily thirst is carefully blended with thirst for other things – jeans, T-shirts, motor bikes and rock-n'-roll. Ideally, we look at the Pepsi can and think, 'There's something much better than carbonated sugar and caffeine in there.'

As with other commodities, beverages are styled through aesthetic production, the inclusion (and exclusion) of cultural signs that constitute everyday life in powerful and meaningful ways. Multinational campaigns like Cool, Cool

3:



Summer appear to dominate the cultural landscape of thirst, but they are not the only purveyors of beverage chic. Flashy, sporty tonics are increasingly the stuff of companies like Hamdard Dawakhana, based on Asaf Ali Road in Old Delhi. At first glance the 'warm', folk institution of classical medicines and home-time tonics, Hamdard is crafting its own aesthetic of coolness in the form of Sharbat Rooh Afza. In one poster, the words 'Ah! Kyaa Taazgi!' leap out of a glass of bright red sharbat. Against a background of icy dew drops, the top of the ad reads, 'Some values never change.'

Rooh Afza signifies a brand of thirst at once convergent with, and opposed to, the cool currency of Pepsi. Both drinks enact two key fantasies of consumption, namely, the therapeutic logic of rehydration and an ideal of physical fitness. At the same time, Pepsi's coolness relies on images of mobility, disposability and convenience (an on-the-go drink) while Rooh Afza is a home-time drink, its aesthetic grounded in values of hospitality and nurturing. As such, Rooh Afza brings thirst home as a family investment while Pepsi urges the young hipster to 'Grind, Boogie, Guzzle Pepsi'. Pepsi is not imagined as a home drink. It's a traveling tonic.<sup>1</sup>

**T**his paper locates Pepsi and Sharbat Rooh Afza as key figures in the cultural performance of thirst in urban India. Here I want to show how an aesthetics of consumption (e.g., rehydration and fitness) demands the technical support of certain production processes, namely, automated production, standardisation, synthesis of plant extracts, and laboratory and clinical drug trials. Consumption and production practices converge to produce a commodity more powerful than the caffeine kick at the end of a Pepsi can: coolness itself. Moving beyond Durkheimian interpretations of social practice as subsumed by standardised codes of behavior or 'moral

consensus', this paper considers thirst as a dialectical tension between visibility and behaviour, language and practice, sign and action. Within this dialectic, the summer time beverage appears as an idiom of translation, its success the measure of its ability to 'quench' the gap between institution and everyday life, tradition and modernity, official and private life, longing and refreshment.

**D**escribed as 'thirst-quenching' and 'summertime' drinks, Pepsi and Rooh Afza are signified by the primary sign of temperature, e.g., a drink's cooling property. However, Rooh Afza is also conceived as a medicinal drink with regulatory and rehabilitative properties<sup>2</sup> that act over a period of time rather than the 'quick-fix' of a carbonated soft drink. Hamdard's export executive, S.K. Srivastava, made this point in an interview: 'Suppose I have a glass of Pepsi at this particular time. After that I have a glass of Sharbat Rooh Afza. After Sharbat Rooh Afza, you won't feel thirsty. You won't feel like having another Pepsi. But after having Pepsi, 15 minutes later you'll feel like having another Pepsi.'

Here thirst is conceived not as a fantasy of mobility emblazoned in the ever changing hoardings above Ashram Chowk and Defense Colony. Rather, thirst is paradigmatic of therapeutic need and refreshment is qualified by a beverage's capacity to make thirst go away. Conversely, it is in the cool sell, or the configuration of words and images of coolness, that products like Pepsi take on power – social power, economic power, political power. Stripped of its glorious (and nationalistic) red, white and blue brand apparel, Pepsi would have much less appeal as a generic cola. Yet, multi-

national campaigns like Cool, Cool Summer are not merely selling beverage chic through icons of US patriotism or consumerism; these campaigns are appropriating and re-packaging words and images that are, historically and therapeutically, common sense to many Delhiites.

One indigenous logic re-constituted in the Cool campaign is the rationalisation that certain beverages and foods should be consumed for their cooling or heating effects, depending on the time of year and whether one is afflicted by a particular illness. According to traditional Unani<sup>3</sup> medical theory, Rooh Afza's fruit, vegetable and flower extracts<sup>4</sup> have cooling properties which restore and regulate bodily fluids. *Hakims* whom I interviewed at Jamia Hamdard University in Delhi explained that Rooh Afza was better known as a medicinal drink in the early part of this century, but today is identified foremost as a 'family beverage' consumed during the hot summer months. One official at Hamdard Dawakhana explained the transformation in brand-image as simply an economic sign: 'Rooh Afza became so popular that it became a consumer product. It became a food product. An over-the-counter product sold like any other fast-moving product.'

**B**ut the historical shift from medicinal to food product was also, significantly, a social transformation. The therapeutic, hydrating image of Rooh Afza became subsumed by a broader social value of nurture, of family and guests, an expanding kinship of thirst and thirst refreshment 'passed down through the generations.' Rooh Afza's aesthetic of enduring social

3. Unani medicine is also called Unani-Tibb, a term that comes from the Arabic *unan*, Greece, and *tibb*, medicine. Unani is based on the humoral theory which posits disease and illness as an imbalance in the four primary humours of the human body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Originating in classical Greece with the work of Hippocrates and Galen, Unani medicine was further codified by Arab scholars such as Avicenna (980-1037 AD) and Rhazes (850-925 AD) as a series of medical texts which are still used in Unani practice today. Unani is practiced to some extent in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia, but is most prevalent in India.

4. Namely, pineapple\*, orange\*, lemon\*, keora, carrot, coriander, spinach\*, hara ghia, endive, mint,

1. The transient image of Pepsi and Coke is further accented by political status, namely, the expulsion of foreign soft drink companies in the 1970s, followed by a sanctioning of their re-entry a few years back.

2. According to Unani theory, each individual has a unique humoral constitution, or *mizaj* (temperament), which is maintained by *Quwwat-e-Mudabbira*, or a power of self-preservation or adjustment. Awakening of this power causes an imbalance in the humoral composition, resulting in possible illness or onset of disease. To restore *Quwwat-e-Mudabbira* to an optimum level, *hakims* recommend either one or a combination of the following: dieto therapy, regimental therapy, pharmacotherapy and surgery. The recommended treatment depends on the severity and type of illness.

relations is further qualified by tag-lines like 'Some values don't change' and a brand-label that is today almost identical to the first Rooh Afza label printed on butter-paper in 1910. Yet, perhaps the most critical aspect of Rooh Afza's familial image is the kinship of the Rooh Afza producers themselves. Here a narrative of enduring company kin ties, among both management and labourers, adds further to an aesthetic of community and family.

**F**ounded as a small dispensary in Hauz Qazi by Hakim Abdul Majeed in 1905, Hamdard Dawakhana is managed today by Hakim Majeed's son, Hakim Abdul Hameed, and his two sons, Abdul Mueed and Hammad Ahmad. Hakim Abdul Hameed's younger brother, Hakim Mohammad Said, went to Pakistan in 1948 and today manages another Hamdard Dawakhana in Karachi. Manufacturing at the Old Delhi (Lal Kuan) and Ghaziabad factories is performed by labourers who come from neighborhoods adjacent to the two plants, and a majority of the 200 labourers at the older factory (Lal Kuan) have male relatives who previously worked, or concurrently work, at the same factory. One of the original items on Hamdard's pharmaceutical list of 1908, Rooh Afza is still a leading Hamdard product 90 years and over three generations later; and many of the hakims and *dawakhana* officials I interviewed attribute this endurance to an inter-generational 'confidence', 'trust' and even 'filial devotion' among consumers and producers of Hamdard.

Yet, an aesthetic of endurance in the making and dispensing of products like Rooh Afza also relies on, and helps to shape, another drug making activity subjugated by more common explanations of traditional drug practice as fraternal organisation or factory kinship: namely, the role of women-oriented kitchen processing of medicinal tonics and other drugs. A key empirical and theoretical

watermelon\*, dried grapes, rose\*, khurfa, white waterlily, gaozaban, khas-khas grass\*, sandalwood\*, and stoneflowers. Hakims whom I interviewed described the items marked with an \* as especially cooling.

problem for my broader thesis is: What is a dawakhana? The word can be translated as *dawa*, medicine, and *khana*, house. In interviews conducted in Delhi, Madras, Bangalore, Aligarh and Hyderabad, Unani practitioners most often defined khana as a manufacturing unit or factory; however, the majority of tonics, pills and *chutneys* manufactured in the dawakhana are based on remedies innovated and prepared for centuries in the kitchen. Even today, Unani medicines in the raw herb form must be first decocted or combined with other food stuffs in the kitchen and then given to the patient.

**U**nlike Pepsi, Frooti and other ready-to-drink bottles and packs, Rooh Afza is a home-based drink prepared in the kitchen and sipped in the cool shade of indoors. It may be a 'fast-moving product,' but it also requires mixing fresh, cold water with several table-spoons of the syrup by hand. Infused into daily life in a manner quite distinct from Priya cinema or Lajpat Nagar on a sunny Saturday, Rooh Afza engages with everyday cultural practice as a culinary style<sup>5</sup> as well as a product of institutionalised factory life. The social life of Rooh Afza is dually private and public, *deshi* and global, warm and cool, while Pepsi is styled almost exclusively as cool – produced, circulated and consumed as the cool currency of discos, cinemas and transnational capital.

In order to 'beat the heat' in a competitive beverage market, Rooh Afza must catch the cool wave of Pepsi and other carbonated head-liners. But Rooh Afza may ride on this cool wave only without changing its label, so to speak. Marketing officials point out that Hamdard will not change Rooh Afza's label or packaging in order to maintain consumer confidence. While one may argue that Rooh Afza, as a traditional product, may lack the slick appeal required to keep up with giants like Pepsi and Coke, one could also argue that Hamdard has a competitive advantage over Pepsi and Coke for two

5. One Rooh Afza pamphlet includes recipes for culinary applications of the syrup such as lassi, milk shakes, ice cream, faluda, qulfi and pudding.

reasons: as a home-time tonic, Rooh Afza has secured a base of trust and understanding, both historical and generational, and with its medicinal plant extracts and lack of caffeine, Rooh Afza can be pitched as a 'healthdrink'.

Hamdard Dawakhana capitalizes on a growing global interest in health tonics by promoting Rooh Afza as a vitaminised health drink and a sports drink. Interestingly, a revival of Rooh Afza's medicinal image popular in the early parts of the century is now particularly visible in the context of international export. Rooh Afza is the signature beverage of the Hamdard Cricket Tournament in Dubai and Hamdard is seeking to expand the international brand-image of Rooh Afza through famous sports figures as spokes models. Keeping in mind critiques made by writers Ashis Nandy (1989), Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Ramachandra Guha (1997) regarding the role of cricket as a relational idiom of nationalist and post-colonial identities, it seems appropriate here to note the impact of beverage chic on the nature of gaming and international 'play' in cricket matches and other sporting events.

**H**ow does an aesthetic of 'fit' consumption (e.g., palatability, convenience, safety and efficacy) engage the technically 'fit' support of production processes as well as human bodies used to test, produce and advertise drinks and medicines?

For one, Pepsi and Coke are endorsing more than cricket in contests like the World Cup. Official or not, the battle of the beverages styles a thirst for youth, fitness and bodily 'success'.<sup>6</sup> The image of Pepsi as a youth tonic is, appropriately, galvanized by Pepsi's own footsoldiers – those cadres of teenagers decked out in Pepsi caps and T-shirts who handed out free cans last summer to thirsty shoppers at Lajpat Nagar and Priya. Pepsi's adver-

6. When Coca-Cola joined the cool can campaign last summer with Thums Up cans sporting graphics of surfers, sky divers and snow boarders, the column 'Marketwatch' in the *Times of India* praised the Thums Up campaign for targeting 'core values of brand-thrill and excitement' (21 May 1996)

tisements on Channel V, at sports events and rock concerts, not only target those 'x' and 'y' generations who are most likely to identify with Pepsi's brand image, these ads contribute to a fetishization of the youthful, sporty body which has made weight-loss programmes such a lucrative industry in western countries. Ironically, cold drinks like Pepsi and Rooh Afza contain 14-16 grams of sugar per serving; glucose is a carbohydrate which, in excess, causes weight gain. Pepsi and Coke sell more diet cola in the US today than regular soft drinks, because people are trying to wear off all the weight they gained drinking cool cans in the 70s and 80s. Ah, the beauty of marketing!

Fitness and bodily ideals are conditioned in terms of gender as well as socio-economic and age groupings. I was sitting with Dr. Khan, a Unani physician, in his clinic in Old Delhi when he raised the subject of female and male preferences in drug treatment. He explained: 'Women will speak like this: "We like only syrup, we don't like chutney." They speak like this.'

'Why do women say this?' I asked. 'It is because their nature is soft,' he said. 'And they are having more liking of tasty things... easy and tasty things. Sometimes chutneys are not of good taste. Some people will prefer tablets also because they are easily swallowed.'

**H**ere an ideal of palatable and convenient drugs resonates in powerful ways with constructions of the female body. Dr. Khan argues that today men and women patients prefer medicines which are convenient or 'easily swallowed'; but women patients, he qualifies, are more likely than male patients to ask for sharbat (syrup) and majoon (chutney) rather than habb (pill) and safoof (powder). Do women really prefer more sugary tonics? I met several women hakims in Bangalore who explained that they themselves do not prefer sugary medicines, but their children are more likely to take a Unani drug which is sweet. They also pointed out that sugar is has therapeutic value, providing energy in the form of carbohydrates and encouraging a faster and more thorough

assimilation of the herbal components of a drug.

Glucose also plays a significant role in oral rehydration therapy. In 1991 Hamdard National Foundation, the governing body of Hamdard Dawakhana and Jamia Hamdard University, published a collection of papers called 'Oral Rehydration Therapy with Rooh Afza'.<sup>7</sup> The editor, R.B. Arora, concluded that these trials proved the efficacy of Rooh Afza in maintaining body fluid and serum electrolytes 'in moderately severe cases of dehydration' and 'permit us to claim the efficacy of Rooh Afza as a home-made oral rehydration therapy in the rural areas or in emergency.'<sup>8</sup>

**E**quivalent to several tablespoons of sugar per drink, the syrup base of Rooh Afza and Pepsi could lead to cavities, heart disease and obesity if consumed in excess. However, unlike Rooh Afza, cola drinks also contain 120 grams of caffeine. Almas Ali describes the ill effects of soft drinks as one symptom of junk food modernity. He writes, 'Are we poisoning ourselves in the quest for modernity? ...When will we in India, with our long tradition and knowledge of a staple diet based on protective foods like fruits and vegetables stop to think of the consequences of discarding ancient dictums and simple food practices?'

In reaction to a growing awareness of the negative effects of a diet too high in saturated fats, sugars and processed foods, various companies are tapping into the health craze and packaging 'better-for-you' products. A growing global

concern with vitamin-enriched foods has created a climate in which companies like Hamdard are strategizing how their medicinal tonics may also be promoted as vitamin-rich. The global commodification of nutrition and enriched foods such as cereal, flour, milk and other commodities (e.g., vitamin-enriched, genetically-enriched and, as the mad cow fiasco last summer grossly demonstrated, disease-enriched) has a powerful impact on local consumption practices, constituting what Arjun Appadurai calls 'folding global pressures into small, already politicized arenas, producing locality in new, globalized ways.'<sup>10</sup> The therapeutic logic of a vitaminised drink is not so different from Rooh Afza's brand-image as a medicinal tonic in 1907. Today, however, global pressures of commodity capitalism increasingly demand cool products manufactured in fit factories according to fit procedures of quality control, standardization, sanitization, automated plant extraction and drug processing, synthesis of plant compounds and oils, and laboratory and clinical drug trials.

**S**tandardisation of raw and formulated herbal medicines is now high priority for most state and market research activities in Ayurveda, Unani and Siddha medicine. Standardisation of drug formulae and processes of production is considered a means towards improving the quality of drugs, thereby increasing consumer confidence. One Hamdard brochure points out that, 'according to the present scientific techniques (and) after experiments over long periods, the extracts of fruits, vegetables and drugs constituting Rooh Afza are prepared in such a manner that these important nutritive properties with such essential ingredients are obtained totally without affecting colour, aroma, flavour, etc.' The brochure explains that extraction methods by solvent and steam vaporisation<sup>11</sup> 'increase the efficacy of Rooh Afza.' At

7. The collected papers include: 'Experimental and clinical studies on the cardiovascular effect of Rooh Afza' by Drs. A. Gulati, R.C. Srimal and B.N. Dhawan of CDRI, Lucknow; 'Clinical, biochemical and pharmacological evaluation of Rooh Afza in various patho-physiological conditions' by Dr. S.K. Gupta of AIIMS, New Delhi; 'Nutritional status of Rooh Afza' by Dr. A. Latif; 'Role of Rooh Afza on blood chemistry' by Dr. M.A. Rahim; 'Rooh Afza in anesthetic practices' by Dr. A.K. Gurwara; 'Need for an oral, home-made rehydration therapy' by Drs. S. Roy and R.B. Arora.

8. Hamdard National Foundation Monograph #5, 1991, p. 27

9. A. Ali, Nutrition, in *The State of India's Health*. Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI), Delhi, 1992.

10. A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p.9.

11. Today plant distillates are extracted by steam generated by oil furnaces rather than firewood, the primary fuel used in home and industrial drug

the same time, 'no modification has taken place in the original formula of Rooh Afza'.

Why should Rooh Afza be more efficacious today than when it was first produced in 1907? Is thirst refreshment merely a physiological effect, or is it also enhanced by the knowledge that a particular product is quality-approved, laboratory and clinically tested? Knowledge, especially if it is produced in a laboratory, is powerful. Social, economic and political power are etched into lab technologies and tests, from machines that measure pH and water-solubility to plant 'fingerprinting' techniques such as thin-line chromatography. It is also clear that mass extraction and synthesis of plant compounds occurs in reaction to consumer demand. As one Hamdard official explained: 'Now the age is of convenience. It's better to have extract straight-away produced by Hamdard. The same quality exists but you can straight-away have it from the bottle. So that is much more convenient. (Hamdard) has identified the needs of the consumer but is not alienating the people from Unani system of medicine.'

Unlike kitchen preparation, the laboratory is a central sign, and design, of the dawakhana today. All of the factories that I visited are connected to research institutions and universities where herbal drugs in raw and formulated form are standardised, tested, developed and, in the case of clinical trials, dispensed to patients. The privileging of the laboratory as a primary zone of drug development is aptly symbolised in Hamdard's recent name change. While Hamdard Dawakhana is still listed as the company name on the Rooh Afza label, most Hamdard products as well as the visiting

making until the 1950s and '60s. At Hamdard's Rooh Afza plant in Ghaziabad, the syrup base of sugar and water is first cooked over steam heat and then combined with the plant extracts and colouring agent in electric mixing machines. Among those Unani physicians I interviewed, 80% believe that the quality of heat or type of fuel makes no difference in drug efficacy, while 20% believe that the type of heat makes a difference (e.g., the *khimam*, or consistency, of a medicine can be more readily evaluated by small-scale hand production over wood fire).

cards of Hamdard managers are printed with the new name, Hamdard Laboratories. Is Hamdard becoming 'less khana and more laboratory? Or is the khana merely expanding, conceptually and physically, to accommodate myriad interests equally?

The inclusion of a fitness aesthetic in the marketing of Rooh Afza seems, at first glance, to run counter to the traditional brand-image of a khana drink. But sales in Rooh Afza tell a different story: Rooh Afza accounted for 45% of Hamdard's Rs 100 crore (US \$28.6 million) turnover in 1995-96 and is expected to increase in turnover percentage this year. As one marketing executive put it, 'Rooh Afza is the superstar.'

While export sales account for only 10% of Hamdard's annual turnover, Rooh Afza is more and more a travelling tonic. An Indian television advertisement pronounces, 'Rooh Afza... One of the most popular summer drinks. Now being exported to many countries.' Currently, Rooh Afza travels to U.A.E., Nepal, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, eastern Africa, Singapore, US and several European countries and is under contract negotiation for export to Canada and Russia. Rooh Afza's mobility conflicts with conventional images of traditional medicine as merely circulated within small, bounded communities or prepared from the pages of ancient medical scriptures. Rather, Unani medicines are increasingly transient and, like Pepsi, are part of India's rapidly expanding import/export economy—a dynamic that requires a re-conceptualization of 'traditional' institutions and the social lives of such institutions in urban India.

Globalization, often characterized by alliances between neo-liberal states and an increasingly mobile capital, is a process through which identities and spaces are constantly being splayed, contested and manipulated. As long as khana

is defined foremost as factory manufacture under the jurisdiction of fraternal production and export networks, the role of kitchen preparations and woman-organised production will be less valued in the current regime of commodity capitalism. In seeing the critical role which kitchen and laboratory practices play in the production of traditional medicine, certain power structures are evident. Namely, a hierarchy of legitimacy exists in terms of which sites and producers are considered most qualified and, therefore, entitled to government and market support. This hierarchy runs from kitchen to clinic to factory to laboratory, with kitchen the least sanctioned and laboratory the most sanctioned space for drug development.

Hamdard is undergoing a revision in its marketing and production sectors that reflects a broader tide-change in the role of traditional medicine in Indian health care. How have institutions like Hamdard endured the vicissitudes of state and market changes for 90 years to remain one of Delhi's most competitively fit, and traditional, manufacturing institutions? I would argue that tradition and competitiveness are increasingly less juxtaposed categories of meaning in the context of urban India.<sup>12</sup> The success of commodities like Rooh Afza relies on a fluid contract between hand-made (kitchen-prepared) and ready-made products, as well as ideals of warm hospitality and cool convenience. Rooh Afza is a deshi drink, grounded in the confidence of generations of consumers, but it is also a traveling tonic, polyglot and portable, which brings a distinctively Indian cool abroad, expanding India's 'playing field' by participating in an ever-thirsty competition between beverages, their patrons and publicists, and national sentiments.

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12. The success of Delhi-based companies Biotique and Shahnaz Husain demonstrate the viability of the Cool Sell (and the environmentally correct Green Sell) in another market of traditional medicine, Ayurvedic cosmetics.

# Gandhi goes to NID

SHIV VISVANATHAN

IN November 1996, Pupul Jayakar decided that the Eames Report on the National Institute of Design (NID) needed a second look. The Eames Report was a founding document of the institute. Jayakar was toying with the idea of a committee, but was somewhat tired of the standard bureaucratic names, the serial epidemic of Brahmins from the Subramaniams and the Bannerjees to the infinity of Pandeys. Committees, she knew, were sheep in sheep's clothing. Yet in this age they were indispensable. They combined the arrogance and the humility of the pronoun *We*. Her sense of Jiddu (J. Krishnamurthy) had showed her that *We* was cybernetic, a guarantee of layers of analysis – conscious and unconscious. Ms Jayakar also realized that the problem of NID was success and she sensed it was a success that was self-defeating. One night, sitting over an elegantly laid out sparse diet, she wondered how the national movement would have looked at NID or her other brainchild INTACH.

In that wilful way that only power and mysticism allows, she convened a committee. She reinvented an aesthetic quarrel, convinced that a report on NID could address some unsolved questions of the national movement. Jayakar realized that *swadeshism* was a meditation on aesthetic desire, on technology, on the body, on the erotic. She wanted *swadeshism* to re-acquire the sensuality it had in the twenties and thirties, a laughter that the philistinism of the BJP could never acquire. Her committee consisted of four people.

The first was Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, former curator at the Boston Museum of Arts, geologist, Indologist, a self-styled protege of William Morris, better known today for his work on *suttee* than his critiques of art.

\* This paper was based on a seminar at NID. I would like to thank my students for the quarrelsome debate that followed. Their honesty and openness has taught me a lot. This paper, an exercise in heuristics, is for them. All characters referred to are both real and inventions.

Nothing Indian can do without an Englishman. If an Indian wrote a detective story, the detective's double would be an Englishman. So true to style, she opted for an Englishman, but a subversive Englishman, a Scot. (She sensed that the committee needed someone who was ideal to chair a department of lost causes.) She invited Patrick Geddes, biologist and town-planner, who was also the first professor of sociology at Bombay University. To the patrician aesthete and the Scottish polymath, she added Gandhi. Somehow she felt that Gandhi needed another chance to rework his ideas on art. To this committee of three she attached as secretary, Gandhi's old friend N.K. Bose, geographer and anthropologist.

The committee met for the first time in the Director's room at NID. There was a quarrelsome air about the place, like the gossip of magpies. Coomaraswamy was already grumbling that Gandhi was simplistic, that his ideas on aesthetics and intellectuals were based on Tolstoy and the scandal around Oscar Wilde. Gandhi replied that he had been catching up on his reading since then. He slyly asked whether Coomaraswamy had read Mary Daly on spinsters or Haraway on cyborgs.

The committee began by formally asking the Director if anything had disturbed or intrigued him. Anything preliminary. The Director hesitated, silently wondering what to tell this eccentric but formidable quartet. And then he recalled two incidents. Just incidents, he said. 'But they stuck to me like the gold coin in Alibaba.' Two stories.

The first related to admission time. The NID, he observed, had an elaborate admission test probing for a diversity of skills. It was quiz time, drawing time, IQ time. In one of them the students were asked to draw themselves ageing. The Director found that they were unable to do so, particularly a large majority of the women. They used two techniques to show the process of ageing – a pair of



spectacles and the streak of TV grey that Indira Gandhi sported. The skin remained untouched. Ageing as time, as process disappeared. The second thing he was distraught about was that some of his students held a rock concert on the day of the Ahmedabad riots. Two old incidents, but the Director claimed that their memory stuck to him like a burr.

**T**he committee then discussed its *modus operandi*. Strangely, maybe expectedly, the four did not want to examine syllabi. They insisted on a different notion of everydayness. Geddes suggested a 'one day in NID' model as a basis for the report. N.K. Bose immediately warmed to the idea. It reminded him of his field-trips, especially the ones around Calcutta. Gandhi was thoughtfully silent and then said that he too had a theory of field-work which he wanted to try out at NID. A three-fold theory: *parikrama*, a walk around NID; *prarthana*, a prayer meeting for want of a better word; and *padyatra*, walking as prayer. Patrick Geddes was charmed, observing that it was the best indigenization of his theory of survey work that he had encountered. The committee then invited a few students and faculty members to join them.

Gandhi startled everyone by insisting on first visiting the servants quarters. The committee walked in gingerly and was impressed by the neatness of the *chuna* plastered walls. Coomaraswamy was delighted by a *rangoli* on the floor. The committee later reported that it was the only piece of living indigenous art in the whole place. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy asked the students why all the walls and columns were bare, with no drawings, designs or decorations. The committee was later told that Jatin Das, the painter, had noticed the same emptiness and wanted to rectify it immediately.

The group then moved to the students hostel. Gandhi began brooding, looking at the western style toilets and Geddes suddenly asked whether NID had a compost heap. He asked the students, what do you do with your waste? N.K. Bose piped in asking whether anyone had designed a toilet, a flush-tank at

NID. Warming to the topic, he enquired whether anyone had seen the 17 different toilet designs in the Gandhi Museum. Coomaraswamy interrupted and asked whether anyone had been to Gandhi's *ashram* at Wardha. He observed that the most elegant object there was the commode in Gandhi's hut, polished to a point that it looked like a Henri Moore sculpture. Gandhi claimed that the toilet must be so clean that one could eat one's food in the place.

**A** younger faculty member objected to the proceedings asking, what does it all have to do with design? Geddes replied, it shows you how you look at your body; it asks whether one sees a cycle between consumption and excretion. Coomaraswamy then added two anecdotes. One was from Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's elegant little essay, *In Praise of Shadows*. Coomaraswamy waxed eloquent about Tanizaki's celebration of the toilet as a communion with nature. He recited an immaculate extract from the book.

'The Japanese toilet is a true place of spiritual repose... the toilet is the perfect place to listen to the chirping of insects or the song of birds, to view the moon... Here I suspect is where Haiku poets over the ages have come by many of their great ideas... Our forbears, making poetry of everything in their lives, transformed what by rights should be the most unsanitary room in the house into a place of unsurpassed elegance, replete with fond associations of the beauties of nature. Compared to westerners, who regard the toilet as utterly unclean and avoid even the mention of it in polite conversation, we are far more sensible and certainly in better taste... The Japanese toilet is perfection.'

Coomaraswamy recited it all like a Supreme Court judgment, paused and then asked if anyone had seen a photograph of the Henri Moore sculpture at the City Hall Plaza in Dallas, Texas. The authorities had planted a set of well-behaved trees around it. A little while later people noticed that the sculpture looked more organic than the trees around it. The trees were a fragment of engineering

skill, upscaled from an architect's model while the Moore sculpture looked like a brooding hill. Children played around it, ignoring the trees. Coomaraswamy explained that technology can be a fact of nature if it springs from the right metaphysics.

The committee quickly moved to the mess hall. The visitors were greeted by a grand wall-painting – a mural which looked like half Superman, half Ninja turtle. Coomaraswamy was furious. He exclaimed that not only do we dream of foreign currency, we dream in a foreign mythology. Gandhi laughed, looked at the painting from several angles and claimed it was a new Hanuman in the service of global Gods.

**P**atrick Geddes was examining the chairs in the dining room. He asked the students whether any of them had designed a chair and then proceeded to arrange them in patterns. Arranging seating is a planning problem. Incidentally, he said, quoting Paul Goodman: 'When I am talking about seating, I am not necessarily talking about chairs. Those particular machines, devised in the West in the last five hundred years as a means of keeping people comfortably attending to business and out of contact with their own or one another's bodies, are usually best dispensed with altogether.' Then followed an elaborate discussion of how to arrange seats for seminars, churches, psychotherapy sessions, political meetings, while Geddes commented on the relation between design and democracy.

The group walked back towards the main buildings. Geddes looked at the eucalyptus trees planted outside and asked the students whether it was a Nehruvian tree, straight, elegant and out of a production graph. To which Gandhi cryptically replied that Nehru loved trees but did not understand parks.

Moving towards the main buildings the committee walked through the main garden. Geddes asked the students what notions of design they saw reflected there? They were perplexed till he asked again, 'Have you wondered why the lane that connects the hostel and the institute is a

straight businesslike one fenced off with mesh wires?' He asked whether they ever thought of meandering between the trees. There followed an interesting discussion on the park as a packaged consumption of nature, reflecting industrial ideologies which destroyed nature in the act of production and consumed it as leisure. Gandhi asked them whether NID secretly reflected industrial ideologies.

The students suddenly realized how the lane divided work and play. You rushed across the lane to work. If you walked through the grass you were laz- ing. They recollected how some of their seniors had once objected to the straight and narrow path.

**T**he committee, by now a friendly meandering line, moved toward the library and the museum. The latter was a large attic but the arrangement was more nostalgia than inspiration. Coomaraswamy called it a poor Nizam's collection, a lucky- dip of chairs, vases, baskets, a pigeon hole of artifacts and demanded that it was time to ventilate the museum. 'Take it out, use it, dream it,' he exclaimed. Geddes added that the museum was a frozen unconscious, a still-life from the past. He claimed that in a museum an artifact loses its sense of everydayness. Coomaraswamy was hysterical about the museum. Turning to the startled students he asked, 'If God were to return today and ask where the tribes, the castes that wove and made these are, would you take him to the museum?' He told them tradition was still alive in the country and one needed to engage with it in the open.

Leaving behind a distraught cura- tor, the committee walked down to a display of the students work. The mem- bers examined each display in detail, questioning each student on the choice of colour, material, the nature of the client. Gandhi was strangely dissatisfied. He claimed that these exhibits were dis- embedded objects disconnected from the community. A technology, he said, is a ganglion, all nerves connected to the community. Like *khadi*. He claimed *khadi* was an invention and what it invented was a community. Bose remarked that around

*khadi* a village level worker could start a malaria eradication programme, a programme for women's education, cattle improvement. But the exhibits showed no such connection. The objects in the exhi- bition were acts of distancing. NID, Gandhi suggested, should make techno-logy not only a branch of aesthetics but of ethics. Only then does it become a design for the living.

**T**he committee added that underly- ing the exhibition were two notions of the body—the model and the robot—with their affinities to pornography and anatomy. Geddes suggested that the students mul- tiply their notions of the body. The indus- trial robot and the mannequin only serve to emphasize the alliance between por- nography and industry. What one needed was to import different notions of time, of rhythm. The committee recommended that along with ergonomics, NID study chronobiology. Just then Gandhi with a twinkle in his eye asked the students whether they practised *brahmacharya*. They were jolted, even embarrassed, till Coomaraswamy reminded them that *brahmacharya* was not just sexual control but a harmony of the five senses.

The committee then met the other members of the faculty in the glass house and shared some tentative observations. Coomaraswamy asked the faculty whether design was a one-sided enlight- enment science. 'Where,' he asked, 'was the place for touch, smell, taste or the ear?' He explained that the thought system of the modern enlightenment was visual. The I and Eye went together. The lan- guage of design—lens, focus, enlighten- ment, clarity, gaze were *optical* words. Even distancing is created by the eye. His question, how was design to be in har- mony with the other senses?

The meeting was silent but one stu- dent arose to challenge him. Touch is there, she claimed. Even time. She insisted that even if film, or industrial design did not have this quality, ceramics did. 'When I throw clay I feel it. My muscles are acts of knowing. Clay is life and when I mould clay, it is pregnant with me. Clay is differ- ent. Clay can save NID. But not plastic.'

The flurry of com- followed this led to little that ful. The faculty in turn asked Gandhi he looked at design. He replied: 'Con-stitutionally.' He claimed that India was ruled by three constitutions. The first was the legal one, but accompanying this were two equally potent covenants. One was the vision of standards—the notions of measure, the calendar, the clock, catego-ries of time, space, weight, number— which determined the very constitution of behaviour. And then there was the pedagogic constitution—the syllabus, the institutions of learning. The IIT, the Delhi School with its vision of development, the National Law School, the IIMS, the NID were all part of the pedagogic constitu- tion. The knowledge they professed was political, deeply political. One had to face NID constitutionally because it was part of this constitutional crisis.

**T**he committee moved on to the *chai dhaba* with the students talking about their different projects. The faculty was a bit embarrassed about the tea. Gandhi and Coomaraswamy were upset at the tea cups. They asked how, next to NID, could such ugliness exist. 'Why not *kullarhs*,' asked Gandhi? 'Clay to be recycled or new cups,' said Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, 'which reflected all the rhythms of beauty.'

Tea was followed by a prayer meet- ing where Gandhi wanted to spin. But realizing there was no *charkha* he asked them to bring their favourite object and pray along with it. After the prayer meeting Gandhi asked students to walk silently in a *padyatra* to the riot-prone areas of the city as an act of apology. He requested them to fast every year on that day.

The minutes of the committee as penned by N.K. Bose were never accepted. Rumour has it that it claimed the NID was afraid of the body, that it was an institution that did not take beauty seriously. In the new wave of globalization the report was lost in some file. But students kept reinventing it and a strange pluralism of reports now exist, enlivening an otherwise standard- ized campus.

# Technofutures

RAVI SUNDARAM

Modernity caricatures and cashes in on the total revolution that never happened.

— Henri Lefebvre,  
'Introduction to Modernity'

A FEW years before he died, the French theorist Gilles Deleuze wrote an important essay<sup>1</sup> where he attempted to rethink Foucault's narrative of modern power. Deleuze's essay is a useful tool to help us enter the debates on the new technosociality of power and its current constellation. Deleuze argues that it is imperative that we do away with Foucault's notion of disciplinary societies to characterise the contemporary transition.

Foucault located what he called disciplinary societies in the 18th century reaching their climax in the contemporary period. The narrative of individual development is from one controlled environment to another—the family, the school, the factory and from time to time, the prison. In fact it is the prison that serves as the key metaphor of modernity. Increasingly, says Deleuze, the disciplinary societies are being replaced by what he calls societies of *control*. While the disciplinary model was based on the analog world of mechanical reproduction, the new mechanisms of control are *digital* and seek to emancipate from production itself — with its cumbersome disciplinary mechanisms. The old factory has been replaced by the abstract corporation.

What is crucial here is the freeing of time and production from the imaginary limits and old modes of representation. *Passwords* replace signatures, perpetual training replaces the old model of education, and internal subversion takes the form of computer viruses or software piracy. What is crucial for Deleuze is the fluidity and inherent insta-

1. 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' *October*, 59, Winter 1992.

bility of the digital world of the corporation — hence the need for new strategies of resistance in the post-disciplinary society.

Deleuze's critique of Foucault points to the very fluidity of power in the post-analog society. Foucault's critique privileged a certain form of *territory* based on mechanical reproduction — hence the focus on the factory, the prison, the school and the elaborate disciplinary apparatus that accompanied them. However, the broader problem is this: despite Deleuze's insights, the post-analog/mechanical form of accumulation remains but one, though growing, aspect of the current crisis. In fact, in peripheral societies like those of South Asia, tiny digital forms of accumulation co-exist with large, overwhelming forms of mechanical reproduction.

Nevertheless, in the West itself the rhetoric on the transition to a new form of accumulation is immense — so much so that much of academic work has been influenced by it. Consider the discussions of post-Fordism among economists, the vast corpus of writings going under the label of post-modernism which challenge received ways of seeing and representing identity, subjectivity and knowledge. As the writer Fredric Jameson and others point out, the old city of the West is challenged by non-places like the suburban shopping mall and theme parks as sites of public interaction. The old city was based on an acknowledgment of territory — it is this factor that is increasingly undermined.

A central factor in this transition is *speed*. Speed here refers to the new terms of accumulation and temporal acceleration: the ability to move money, commodities, and knowledge at an ever-increasing pace. The geographer David Harvey calls this the space-time compres-

sion – the annihilation of space by time. This is part of the transition from Foucault's disciplinary societies and regimes of mechanical reproduction on which much of 20th century Marxist and Keynesian critiques (which assumed territoriality) were based. A key component of this emerging order has been the rapid development of electronic space.

**T**his new geography goes under the representational shorthand 'cyberspace', which of course has nothing to do with the original use of the term in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*.<sup>2</sup> Electronic space for our purposes refers to high-speed networks connected by computers to exchange information and commodities. It is also increasingly a space for play and performance where the anonymity of network-space is used for temporarily crossing identities and playing with new desires.

For many years electronic space was a monopoly of states and financial institutions for the exchange of information on strategic and financial transactions. Even to this day the largest networks are those of the financial institutions to move large sums of money and capital across continents within a matter of seconds. The major transitions at the level of public space took place in the late 1970s with invention of cheap computers and communication devices. The 'internet' had been set up as decentralised structure in the late 1960s by the US Defense Department to facilitate easy communication in case of a nuclear holocaust. By the 1970s this was available to educational institutions. In the 1980s small electronic bulletin boards sprung up all over the West, and by the early 1990s, with the invention of a graphical interface to the World-wide web, the great cyberspace hype had begun.

There is still an air of liminality to global network space, with various players jostling for key positions of power.

At the head are the transnational corporations which produce software, seeking to (further) commercialise electronic space with the help of client state managers. For the state managers, particularly in countries like India, cyberspace is grafted to old-style developmentalism, albeit with the attendant fears of the instability of electronic borders and moralist concerns on sexual content. On the other hand there are those who have their activist agendas in electronic space. These range from Californian new-age net theorists who argue that electronic space offers an emancipation from the messy problems of territory and Cartesian identity. A very different range of radical net activists/theorists based in Europe influenced by a combination of Marxist, anarchist, situationist and autonomist practices argue that it is the anarchy and autonomy of electronic space which must be preserved, with a minimalist technoculture to allow for more access.

**W**hat of India? I would like to argue that behind the impetus towards virtual space is the retreat of large sections of the old upper caste, anglicized elite from the political sphere. It is important not to be crude in speaking about this phenomenon, but since the 1980s the cartography of the political public is being actively re-written with the emergence of new social movements of oppressed castes. The rise of these movements have had the effect of challenging the old panoptics of the state which was predicated on a homogenising legislative modernity, led by an enlightened elite of modernisers. The symbolic space of this elite lay in the abstractions of national development and the 'economy'. The rise of the new movements has initiated a process that may effectively unseat the old elites from the political sphere; the certainties of the old nationalist journey no longer obtain.

For the old elite the state is no longer the secure kingdom of cultural hegemony and identitarian certainty.<sup>3</sup> In the event

the social landscape has undergone an effective Haussmannisation marked by upper caste retreats from the old grid of politics and abstract nationalist identity. The large metropolitan centres are being re-configured to accommodate a re-invented suburbia free from subaltern intrusions: these are simulated landscapes of designer villages, transplanted American post-modern designs and private security. But what of the nationalist journey? My argument is that for this elite-in-retreat, the old journey is being partly transcended by the encounter into virtual space. In its place new practices have emerged which have sought to both overcome the corporeality of the nationalist border, while at the same time attempting to create new 'nationalist' electronic communities conforming to a 'Hindu' imaginary. This space is therefore doubly coded by practices that seek to map out a new conception of space beyond the nation, while at the same time attempting to inscribe a new Hindu nationalist community in virtual space.

**A**t the centre of this new landscape is the growth of new technologies of representation which have had the effect of disrupting the old tropes of anti-colonialism and Nehruvian nationalism. If the village and the economy functioned as a representational shorthand for the Gandhian and Nehruvian imaginary respectively, the new cultural landscapes in the 1990s saw a complex of initiatives centred around new narratives of consumption and desire which resist easy historicist classification. These new practices have centred around the rapid growth of television, video, music and one of the world's largest film industries. Foreign satellites now beam images to India, effectively breaking the state's monopoly over television; India now has one of the world's largest video and audio-cassette industries, largely centred around the film industry.

The new cultural space is crisscrossed by a fluidity of national/regional/global cultural styles mediated by the recognition of a new agent – the 'consumer-subject'; the old moral codes regu-

2. In *Neuromancer*, Gibson calls cyberspace 'consensual hallucination'. *Neuromancer* is a brilliant dystopian novel which soon achieved cult status. It is filled with a world of hackers and identity swappers in a post-industrial future.

3. The political wagers of the upper caste elite have shifted from the state to the Hindu nationalist movement; yet other sections support the Congress party.

lating desire are being reconstituted and a new Hindu nationalist imaginary attempts to cannibalise all these new practices for its political project. There is no doubt that for the time being at least, the claims of a legislative modernity are suspect. The panoptic vision of a regulated cultural practice, while voiced periodically, lacks the authority and legitimacy as in the past.<sup>4</sup>

**I**n this liminal space mediated by various cross-practices, an elite cyberpublic occupies a hybrid space which attempts to emancipate itself from the nation, its border and its political public. The modes of representation allude to a fluid space where the nation is present yet thoroughly displaced, informed by a hybrid language, styles, and a volatile mixture of both presence and absence.

In this context, the World-wide web offers the phantasmic possibility of playing with an identity that recognises displacement. The journey into virtual space is the journey beyond the nation. For the web traveller, a typical member of the displaced elite public in India, the West is recreated/simulated as a simultaneous presence. There is a certain experience of web travel when logging on from the Third World, that almost evokes Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's *flâneur* or the stroller in Second Empire Paris. The web traveller in the elite cyberpublic seeks out the virtual space of the web to experience the 'shock of the new' which Benjamin calls the distinctive feature of modernity. The images of the web, like the city in Haussmannised Paris, are shot through with a phantasmic space where exist dream-worlds of desire and consumption – the arcades in Benjamin's story and the web sites for our traveller. The city for the *flâneur* has a labyrinthine character, with secret passages, a web of experiences and unknown dreams which is sought out by the stroller.

4. This refers to periodic calls by groups for censorship of films with explicit sequences in the name of moral order. Most state attempts at widening censorship guidelines have been ineffective. In fact, a recent Supreme Court judgment struck down the verdict of a lower court preventing the screening of the controversial film, *Bandit Queen*.

This is where Baudelaire's *flâneur* – the mythic hero of modernism – and the late 20th century Indian web traveller part. For the *flâneur*, the crowd was the great veil between himself and the phantasmagoria of the city. For the web traveller of the elite cyberpublic, the journeys into virtual space perform the opposite function – of an emancipation *from* the crowd of real time.

Web strolling from India is an entry into a space whose virtuality enhances the feeling of being in the West. In the context of other experiences of space-time acceleration brought about by the television revolution of the 1990s, this feeling is magnified. This is an entirely new geography of desire, almost exclusively centred around sites in the West.<sup>5</sup> This is quite distinct from the new ethnographies of travel in the West.

**W**riting from a western setting, James Clifford points out: 'An older topography of experience and travel is exploded. One no longer leaves home confident of finding something new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth....'

For the Indian web traveller the incursions assume a search for a mythic space of modernity, where 'newness' is emancipated from *territory*. Like Baudelaire's *flâneur* who sought out the crowd in his search for the 'ever-new', the web traveller journeys on the highway to look for the new. The web sites constitute a simulated exhibition ('places of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity' – Benjamin) where the traveller-consumer, like the visitor to the 19th century site, is asked to 'look at everything, touch nothing.' (Benjamin in Frisby: 254:1986) These pilgrimages have the effect of an experience of modernity (shock, ecstasy, entry into power-knowledge spaces) hitherto unknown in the periphery, even for the elite. Yet they are fleeting experiences,

5. Sites located in India have almost no popularity with travellers who live in the country. Almost all the 'hits' for Indian sites have been from abroad. See the *Times of India*, 22 May 1996.

burdened by real time constraints.<sup>6</sup> For the web traveller the fleeting experience of transcending the border, rather than long-term immersion into virtual space is the norm.

**A**s mentioned before, web journeys are informed by a double coding, one side of which is the elite cyberpublic's emancipation from the old nationalist grid. The other side is the creation of a naturalised space of India on the web – initiated largely by Indians in the diaspora. Dominated by expatriate Indians sympathetic to Hindu nationalism, these web sites<sup>7</sup> pose Hindu identity as isomorphic with India: a space purged of ambivalence.<sup>8</sup> It is almost as if the old legislative modernity of the Nehru period has been transplanted to virtual space, purged of its democratic political sphere.<sup>9</sup> In the virtual space of India on these web sites, Hindu identity becomes an *artifact* – a contestable process is replaced by a reified boundary. For the NRI, the virtual space of India finally replaces the actual pressure of the return. The journey is now a sanitised one, no longer fraught with tension – the shock and complaints of peripheral poverty, the perplexities of cultural self-questioning. Here the web sites act as markers of homogenised spiritual space, with rigid cultural borders, where India functions as a virtual museum for those for whom Hinduism can fulfill the great unfulfilled dream of legislative reason – a world without ambivalence.

Most social movements in India have as their point of departure the cartography of the post-independence

6. Once again, very few telephone connections manage to stay on-line for more than 20 minutes.

7. To be sure alternative sites set up by dissenting members of the expatriate community do exist. However, these sites cannot compete with those of the right wing.

8. The web site of the Bharatiya Janata Party which puts out an aggressive brand of nationalism based on majoritarianism and anti-Muslim rhetoric is, in fact, operated from the US! The irony of this was entirely lost on the leadership of the BJP.

9. It is important to remember that despite all the authoritarian and disciplinary initiatives of Nehruvian panoptics, the relationship to the democratic political sphere prevented the realisation of a 'totally administered society'.



nationalist state. As pointed out earlier, the state privileged a model of development; it iconised the dam and the steel mill as the imaginative reference points of development. The official discourse on science and technology remained within the framework of developmental modernism imposed on the periphery. Here science and technology were opposed to culture and abstracted from notions of play, creative tradition and aesthetic experiment.

What is important is that the sites of nationalist science were symbolised by the magnified products of developmental modernism – the dam and the steel mill. The new social movements that emerged after the 1970s generated a critique of the technological/developmental imaginary of nationalism, stressing a range of alternative practices. The various movements (those of women, untouchables, anti-dam) did not pose a cohesive alternative; their opposition to state sponsored technological practices was generally uniform.

Thus when the computer was initially introduced in the 1980s as the neo-modernist successor to the dam, the hostility of both the new social movements and the old left was total. They parodied the utility of the computer in a peripheral society like India, a critique that generally echoed the then prevalent notions of utility, sustainability and concerns about workforce cutbacks. The fact that the computer was introduced with the old-style developmental rhetoric made the movements even more suspicious.<sup>10</sup>

Today, in the 1990s, the movements have come to not only accept the computer but also the creative possibility of networking. This is a dramatic change for which a number of factors have been cited. In the first place the old movements are in a crisis – many have disintegrated and joined the NGO sector. The crisis of old-style nationalism and Marxism have reshaped the old reference

points for the movements. The fast growing NGO sector is linked to global donors; the sector's incorporation into global electronic space is only a matter of time. It seems to me that these factors are a necessary but not sufficient explanation for the widespread acceptance of electronic networks in the movement community. At the heart of the transition are hidden issues of desire and identity which have been brought into play.

The old sites of the large dam and the steel mill were enlarged symbols of the nationalist will-to-power, generating the violence of displacement and the destruction of local communities. As violent symbols, these sites are still the focus of large movements. On the other hand, the world of virtual space that exists behind the computer lacks any corporeal violence associated with developmentalism. It seems to me that virtual spaces began to evoke a world of pleasure and initiation for individual activists without the violence of developmental modernism. A certain aesthetics of experimentation had already been experienced by activists in their search for alternatives to developmentalist disasters. With the coming of e-mail, the Internet, and later bulletin boards, a liminal space emerged where utopian desires for modernity and the possibility of experimentation without destruction overlapped with the pleasures of initiation rituals into technoculture. Further, there is the possibility of a dialogue with the self: the more rounded forms of identity in the nationalist period mistrusted ambivalence. In every sense, new boundaries of imagination and agency have been created.

To be sure, only a small minority of activists are still connected – those who are either urban, relatively affluent, or have access to global funds. But what is remarkable is the widespread legitimacy of electronic space among dissenters and activists, who would be equally critical of the technological monuments of nationalism. It could be argued that the entry of virtual spaces posed technology as a cultural practice in a way that

the developmental modernism<sup>11</sup> of the Nehruvian period (with the singular emphasis on monuments) could never do. It anticipates a new situated technosocial space, perhaps a 'cyborgness', for the periphery. I use these terms with considerable hesitation for reasons that will be spelt out later. But following Donna Haraway's call for 'situated knowledges', we can argue that new sets of practices could emerge in India which may mark the transition from the binary spaces of developmental modernism.

Developmental modernism operated within a Third World version of what Foucault has called the blackmail of the Enlightenment. Foucault uses this formulation in his famous essay on Kant's 'What is Enlightenment' to refer to the violence of the philosophical choices presented by the Enlightenment: 'You either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism...; or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality....' (1984:43) There is, says Foucault, simply no other choice: *no tertium datur*. In the Indian case, the canvas was less olympian: it operated within the rather simplistic oppositions of development/science/progress versus tradition/reaction/stasis. For many decades, the first triad was overwhelmingly hegemonic, based on the state's monopoly of power and violence and even extending to old left oppositional movements. It is only in recent decades, with the rise of the new social movements, that elements of a genuine *aufhebung* have emerged. The old oppositions do not hold securely anymore – a discursive space of questioning has emerged, energising new exchanges on technology, tradition and popular experimentation.<sup>12</sup>

11. Developmental modernism does not entertain a dialectical doubt that was possible in Europe. Here the emphasis was more on functional mapping of space based on the triad – development/science/nation. The pioneers of developmental modernism were neither artists nor philosophers, but what Rabinow in his work on the French modern calls 'technicians of general ideas' (1989); anonymous state managers who painstakingly built the model.

12. The demise of the aura of technology has also

10. In addition, the computer introduced was the old IBM PC with a rather unattractive modernist architecture. Macs were too expensive since clones did not exist.

The current generation of activists have been reared on this new diet where opposition to large dams and displacement could go hand in hand (wherever possible) with ventures into virtual space. This transition is so significant that it is remarkable that it has gone unnoticed.<sup>13</sup>

**N**evertheless, despite the richness and potentials of this cyberpublic in negotiating a space between the market and the state, the access to virtual space still remains a *privilege*. The plans of the state network Enet to connect 8,000 colleges and schools will undoubtedly expand this public. However, there is an urgent need to fight for cheap, publicly accessible networks. The current neo-liberal mood of the ruling elite is hostile to any public space in the electronic media; a long battle is ahead for activists.<sup>14</sup>

For India, cyberspace and the cultural experiences that it evoked arrived as a representation of the 'new' in ways that were complexly coded.<sup>15</sup> A number of loose cyberpublics emerged: reflecting in diverse ways state, neo-elite and popular strategies to negotiate the crisis of the old panoptical grid of nationalism and the supremacy of the border. Cyberculture also came to India within the framework

of a new package of globalisation which contained within it a potent mixture of pleasure and danger. If on the one hand globalisation has unleashed a new discourse of consumption which unsettled the old nationalist/Marxist denial of the consuming public, the global also comes on the backs of the power of transnational corporations with their tremendous power and contempt for popular participation. As Virilio points out, 'the new communications technologies will only further democracy if, and only if, we oppose from the beginning the caricature of global society being hatched for us by big multinational corporations throwing themselves at a breakneck pace down the information superhighways.' (1995)

**T**o be sure the inherent feature of newness is contingency, which may contain the possibilities of its demise. Says Huyssen, 'Our fascination with the new is always already muted, for we know that the new tends to include its own vanishing, the foreknowledge of its obsolescence at its very moment of appearance. The time span of the new shrinks and moves towards vanishing point.' (1995:26) The problem is, as I have mentioned above, that the new does not reproduce itself globally in fundamentally similar ways. Despite all the fantasies of virtuality, newness is inscribed in a different set of overlapping imaginaries when it reaches a Third World country like India. *Contra* Virilio, speed has many faces and shall continue to do so for some time to come.

What is needed is an approach that is sensitive to the situated character of knowledge-formations and cyberpractices in the Third World, where narratives of critique and fluidity in the West may have entirely different consequences when re-presented in a country like India.

global time which is going to lead to the end of local time, Virilio writes, 'For the first time history is going to unfold within a one-time system: global time... (I)n the very near future, our history will happen in universal time, itself the outcome of instantaneity – there only'. (1995) Virilio counters this bleak scenario with possibility of the 'accidents of accidents' – the cyber-accident, when networks crash and capitalism 'collapses'.

Consider for example the emergence of new techno-practices in the West which have led to a blurring of the historical distinctions between nature and culture, between the body and the machine. As a number of writers (Haraway: 1991; Rabinow: 1992; Stone: 1992) have pointed out, the overlap of technology, biology and culture have led to a situation where the old distinctions between organicity and technology, between culture, experience and science (where one or the other was privileged) have lost their old categorical fixity. This involves a crucial transition from the old Enlightenment oppositions of nature and culture from which flowed the representations of human praxis and subject formation. As Rabinow argues, 'While nature is being remodeled on the model of culture, the latter is re-constructed on the basis of nature.' (Ibid)

**W**hat happens to this transition when it reaches the periphery of world capitalism? The new biosociality is surely implicated in the plunder of plant species from the Third World and their re-location to the West; technoculture is a clear part of the new expansion strategies of multinational companies in the periphery. Techno-sociality in India speaks to elite strategies of withdrawal and re-occupation of the national; it is also implicated in a culture of distinction and distance from the lives of the underprivileged.

My point is not to score old left polemical points against the new cultural constellations emerging in the West. The issue is that these constellations are part of a new flexible system of accumulation on a world scale where 'a dizzying sense of bodily freedom' for one may mean displacement and loss in another part of the world we live in. To neglect this would not just be unreflexive on the part those who live and enjoy the pleasures of virtual space, it would be connivance with the new grammar of power emerging on a world scale.

However, boundary stories do matter, even on the periphery. The stories have been less about the individual body-

its flip side: the emergence of a technopia of global consumption which has as its main address the elite of the second cyberpublic.

13. The rapid rise of a mass consumption culture in the urban areas has removed the older aura around 'technical' articles of consumption. Articles which the urban mass public previously saw only as exhibitionary items (where, as Benjamin pointed out, 'you could see, but not touch') are now available for daily use. These include (public and private) telephones, televisions and, for the more affluent, VCRs and refrigerators. Though many activists who are 'into' cyberspace may be ambivalent towards the new consumption space, this is a world where they work and struggle.

14. Given the situation of widespread income inequalities in a country like India, some form of state funding is vital for the development of alternative networks. Private and multinational capital has shown little interest in developing alternative spaces – there is every likelihood this attitude will continue in the near future. However, the struggle must be to create a genuine public space where access to networks is made as open as possible, without state controls.

15. Even as perceptive an observer like Paul Virilio tends to miss the mediated character of this transmission. Arguing that the cyberspace heralds a new

space of the citizen as of re-writing new maps of the national, where cyber-journeys have punctured the old panoptic border. From the point of view of situating knowledge we can rewrite Haraway's brilliant statement on the idea of nature: 'The certainty of what constitutes the nation... (that is, as) a source of insight, a subject for knowledge, and a promise for innocence — is undermined, perhaps fatally.' (1991)

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# Books

**INDIA: The Golden Jubilee.** Granta 57, London, 1997.

THE month running March-April has been rich in books launched. Among them, *Granta 57* has excited much comment. Most of it has been adverse, much of this deservedly, but some of it for phoney reasons which are telling in themselves. I don't buy moans about the white man's (or woman's) 'zoological' view of India. We must get over this chip some time, surely? We'd be as zoological if we ever got around to looking at cultures other than our own. Equally, I cannot buy the lament about English being inadequate to represent Indian reality. Especially when it emanates from those engaged in this very activity. We continue, alas, to be victims of that 'deep suspicion of – as well as deep slavishness to' western approval, which Alok Rai (ironically) talks about in his recent, excellent interview with Arundhati Roy.

But it is what Arundhati Roy herself says in this same interview, which focused for me, why *Granta* on India at 50 fails to rise to the occasion: The paradox (in human nature) is, 'how brutal we can be, how deeply we can love' and 'writing about one makes no sense without writing about the other.'

This is the crux. This is where *Granta* fails to connect (except in part) and, therefore, why it fails to excite. Knowing that both the editors of the volume possess this sensibility, one expected the whole issue to be similarly informed. I have to believe that their failure had more to do with exigency than with agency. Yet, the cover, over which surely they did have control, is in bad taste for a start. Instead, they could have used the delightful map just inside. Even the *big names* listed in small print at the bottom speak of this indifference to worth, perhaps in the name of hard-sell. Because, of the thirteen names on the cover, only three are really worth star-billing. Too bad that western readers of *Granta* are ignorant of the vibrancy of the many new voices in India. The three I choose are Hoagland, Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy. As for the others, Anita Desai passes but the rest have little more than their names to offer. Buchan (Kashmir), Dalrymple (Bihar), Chaudhari, Mehta, Naipaul, Narayan, Seth and Tully all disappoint precisely because

they fail to engage or connect in the way Arundhati Roy means, and so leave us cold. The volume as a whole also lacks coherence and planning.

But once past the cover and the *big names*, you will find good things. These are what touch the vitals of what India is and means: what it was, what it has lost, what it may become. If the entire volume had comprised writing of the quality and integrity – above all the engagement – of Ian Jack, Urvashi Butalia, Edward Hoagland, Michael Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy, or pictures such as those by Sanjeev Saith and Dayanita Singh (poorly reproduced, alas) it would have been a true celebration of India's 50th, warts and all. Let me elaborate.

Ian Jack's fine Introduction is a personal description of the India he first came to twenty years ago. An India still locked into itself, a little 'remote and austere' and still resolved to 'cope with its problems and fulfill its aspirations in its own way.' That was an age 'when political rhetoric focused on the poor, for whom a collapsing telephone system was hardly a priority compared to the price of rice and onions.' Then, 'the poor matter (ed) in India as they did not in many other developing countries – say China –' says Jack, deliberately. 'They are, of course, a majority. They also have the vote.'

Jack interrogates the current India which has made the Emergency years seem like 'an unreachable era.' But his interrogation is always participatory. He observes, in a single, cogent line, a disturbing conundrum: 'The forces of economics and democracy are opposed.' And he ends with another. A quote from a question put to him by a railway official in Dhanbad: Could he think of 'any country, at any time in its history, which had achieved these three things simultaneously: one, a dynamic economy; two, a redistribution of wealth and justice; three, a fair and law-abiding democracy?' As Ian Jack concludes, 'this remains the greatest conundrum of its (India's) future, and ours.'

To continue with those who do honour to this volume. Urvashi Butalia grips one totally with her powerful, poignant and pain-filled search for and encounter with a long-lost uncle across the border in Pakistan. Most painful for all who suffered Partition is the tightly restrained acceptance that

it was an ending. There could be no retracing of the steps taken then. Nothing more than a brief and fleeting restoration of the ties of blood before the final, ineluctable parting.

Edward Hoagland's 'Wild Things' is not, for goodness sake, about wild life *per se*. It is about the natural world which has resonated with the human world since time began and now stands threatened with extinction: with being gazumped by a 'virtual wilderness' of albino king snakes, tigers and tiglon, even as we probe the possibility of primitive life on Mars. This fundamental threat to a part of the very foundations of our shared human heritage is evoked with passion, irony and empathy. What is striking is Hoagland's natural and utterly matter-of-fact respect for and ability to relate to not only the wild but equally the impoverished, nearly extinct tribal hunter-gatherers in their dying habitat. Their humanity and dignity shine through the misery of their lives and Hoagland never patronises them. Nor does he patronise the engaging Salim, his 'Muslim-Hindu-Christian' guide and escort in south India, or all the other quixotic but authentic social and individual encounters he had in his travels there. These restored for him a faith in human nature in a world turning rapidly plastic and homogenised.

Again, Michael Ondaatje's poem, 'What We have Lost', touches another fundamental of the sub-continent's collective consciousness. His is the only contribution which raises the question about values and traditions, cultures and ancient ways of knowing, which have been abandoned in the lusting after mammon and the West.

If only there had been a carefully selected elaboration of the themes and issues, the signs and portents, voiced by Jack, Butalia, Hoagland and Ondaatje, the gravely moving portraits of Sanjeev Saith's Freedom Gallery, and the bold, bald statements of Dayanita Singh's sassy Mother India.... If only there had been some more contemporary fiction to strengthen the amazing new work of Arundhati Roy – to demonstrate, I mean, that there have been a whole crop of vibrant new voices in recent years – one would have achieved a fitting tribute to this ancient/middle-aged/young hag called India, which still has a lot of life and blood in her bones. Will someone take up the challenge?

Primila Lewis

**SNAKES AND LADDERS: A View of Modern India** by  
Gita Mehta. Secker and Warburg (Minerva Paperbacks),  
London, 1997.

UNLIKE most books, which start with a good idea and fall down on the execution, Gita Mehta's latest offering is a bad idea which has resulted in rather a good book.

The idea – that one person can give a picture of India's social, political and artistic culture since Independence – can only result in either overweening ambition or naiveté. Mehta's ability to steer (mostly) clear of hubris on the one hand and simplicity on the other is due in no small part to

a combination of wit and a felicitous style of writing. She emerges as a likeable, inquisitive, perspicacious commentator, who oscillates between an open-mouthed awe at the sheer magnitude of India's problems and possibilities, and a genuine, down-to-earth enthusiasm for the small things which make living here such a delight.

The blurb kicks off: 'Here at last is a key to modern India,' and then embarks on a litany of standard clichés: largest film industry vs. oldest religion, ancient civilization and fifty years young nation, largest democracy in the world but still practises the caste system. This kind of blurb evokes but two responses: a yawn or an urge to deliver a swift uppercut to the jaw of whoever was responsible for such drivel. Unless, that is, you are someone who knows next to nothing about India and are looking for a bit of light bedtime reading and some instant quotables for your next dinner party.

If you're hoping for the 'key to modern India,' as the blurb says, you'll be in for a disappointment – but I'd suggest giving up that doomed quest altogether and enjoy what we do have. Mehta's book is a kind of *chhat masala* of statistics, anecdotes, snippets of information, ancient myths and modern legends. It reminds me of this Mumbai *walla* I once heard on a BBC radio programme, waxing lyrical about *pani puri* on Chowpatty beach. The only way he could describe the delightful clash of tastes that assault the tongue – sharp tamarind with soft chick pea, crunchy shell with *jeera* water, the sweet and the salt – was that the different flavours 'flirted' with each other. More of a seduction than a fight, Mehta's book is bit like that: piquant, moreish, a between-meals book, ultimately unsatisfying if you're looking for something to really get your teeth into, but nice enough as a snack.

She romps through the last fifty years scattering unsubstantiated statistics hither and yon: one out of every six people on the planet is an Indian, three-quarters of whom live in villages, 400 million Indians live in cities (Where are the rest? In the suburbs? Abroad? We're not told). 100 million of them are Muslim, making it the third largest Muslim population of any country on earth. We have 20 million dollar millionaires and 23 million craftsmen; the Indian army is the third largest in the world. Perhaps the most overused word in the book is 'million'. Mehta uses her statistics more to convey sheer *scale* than provide accurate data.

Mehta doesn't know quite whether to laud the Indian way of doing things, or condemn it, or both. At one point she proudly points out that 'We haven't set fire to the past on the specious grounds that only the destruction of the past would allow us a future.' Later in the book she talks of the BJP's attempt to do just that in their rewriting of the pluralist, multi-faith histories of India as a Hindu story, brutally enacted at the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. She celebrates the fact that India rests on the three cardinal pillars of democracy: a secret ballot, a free press, an independent judiciary, but highlights the destruction of those very things, during the Emergency, of course, and again and increasingly with



the modern political shenanigans at state and national levels.

Mehta too frequently opts for rhetoric over analysis, but when she gets it right, she really gets it right. Weaving together the myth of Sita's temptation outside the *Laxmanrekha* by the sight of a golden deer calling to her in Rama's voice and the genesis of contemporary communal politics, she says: 'India's leaders had seen the golden deer of power running through India's trees and it was calling to them in God's voice.'

She certainly turns a neat phrase: 'We smell more of compost-heap than of the graveyard,' and I loved the phrase 'disco democracy' – though I've no idea what it actually means. However, occasionally she simply gets it wrong. By translating *vishvakarma* – the ritual by which one honours the tools of one's trade – as 'weapon worship', she paints a picture, unwittingly or not, of a superstitious, savage mentality.

Her ability to profane the sacred cows of Indian culture, which she so refreshingly demonstrated in her first book, *Karma Cola*, comes to good use here, particularly in her descriptions of the Gandhi dynasty, and at her best she is a sharp and incisive critic. However, she does tend to hark back to an idealised, idyllic past, particularly in the chapters on sexuality and the environment.

The statistics in the latter certainly have a shock power: 'If commercial felling continues at the present rate there will not be a single tree left by the end of the century... it seems beyond belief that Indians could have permitted half the trees of India to be cut down by the administrators of the British Empire in the last century... and then cut down half of the remaining half during the last thirty years.' Such a grim outlook makes it well-nigh impossible to argue with her conclusions that 'by replacing veneration of the tree with consumption of the tree it is as if the subcontinent is no longer to connect cause with effect.'

I'm more sceptical about her evocation of a golden era of Indian eroticism, enshrined in Khajuraho statuary, the *Kama Sutra* and the singing of *Gita Govinda*: 'Indian sexuality is increasingly dictated by western fashion, and the sensual and sexual confidence that created India's majestic erotic monuments has now been replaced by packaged fantasies.' It seems too easy to blame 'westernisation' for repressive and/or exploitative sexuality which has had a history as long and varied here as anywhere in the world.

At the end of the book, one has learnt a little about a lot, and perhaps that's the most we can hope for in a short, tradey 'fifty years' type paperback. Her hopes that this will teach the youth of India a little about their own country is perhaps misguided. The book has clearly been conceived of and packaged for a foreign, mostly western, readership. Let's hope that their palettes are whetted for more substantial fodder with this tasty morsel.

Anita Roy

**DELHI'S HISTORIC VILLAGES: A Photographic Evocation** by Charles Lewis and Karoki Lewis. Ravi Dayal Publisher, Delhi, 1997.

SOMETIMES I wonder whether there are close parallels between the art of film production and the art of the national governance of monuments. In the world of film production one or two stars account for over half the film's budget and the rest of the cast is always left on the fringes, groveling for recognition and remuneration. In the world of the governance of monuments, the entire budget is used up in spitting and polishing a few star monuments while thousands of lesser monuments crumble into the jaws of urbanisation. The government gets into a frenzy about nominating the Red Fort and Humayun's tomb for UNESCO recognition as World Heritage Sites. Perhaps the analogy of Bollywood could be extended just a fraction more to round off the argument. In the production of a film, the plot is seldom of critical value and it is always written after the stars have been signed up. The script writer is certainly a fringe character. In the governance of monuments, the star monument is the only historical artifact that counts. Its context, setting and ancillary structures and surrounding gardens seldom get the conservation attention that they deserve.

This book is about those neglected, perishing lesser monuments that are located in the urban orphanages of Delhi called 'Lal Dora' villages. Authors Lewis and Lewis have pictorially evoked Hauz Khas, Masjid Moth, Shahpur Jat, Begumpur, Khirki and Chirag Delhi. In a peculiar historical development the Delhi Development Authority, emphasising destruction more than development, stripped these villages of their land but allowed them to retain their built-up properties in the *kasbah*'s.

Surrounded by a red line on the map, these villages became the hunting grounds for all of Delhi's pot bellied, scooter riding brokers who bought and sold *kasbah* properties which did not require sanctions. The new owners quickly built four floor blocks after knocking down the original historical *kasbah* houses. The monuments, of course, could not be touched as there was the *Lakshman rekha* of the Archaeological Survey around them. Today these precious monuments sit cheek by jowl with the four storey concrete boxes that are shown in the records as the original structures of the *kasbah*.

The poignant situation of these monuments is brought out movingly in the photographs by Karoki Lewis. These are beautiful photographs and each one of them conveys a sense of discovering a new place in a city so familiar to me. They are moving because they also convey the sad condition of the monuments. The disintegration of Purana Qila, the abusive construction onto the wall of the Hauz Khas monument, or the convenient urinals invented by passers-by on monument walls – each of these conditions is vividly portrayed in the photographs.

Within the alleys of these villages where the builders' hammers have been resisted, lives the microcosm of India, the middle-world of the community that has for generations lived in these kasbahs. Lewis has captured their lives in these photographs – their laughter, their children, as also the pathos of their independent world.

The 117 black and white plates are accompanied by a lengthy text by Charles Lewis, no stranger to India or for that matter the publishing world. The son proceeded independently to take photographs, while the father sat down to research the history of these monuments, in effect encompassing the entire Sultanate history of Delhi in some thirty pages. This history, narrated through the usual Kings, Sultans and battles, adds little to the book. Indeed, it unnecessarily trips up the reader and delays the moment of delight. There are illustrations of miniature representations of Muhammed Tughlaq and Timur and the Qutub complex, but they barely provide the much needed spice for this introductory part of the book.

It is only when Lewis begins the description of each village in separate chapters that the flagging text begins to race. 'There, beyond the vegetable stalls and a peepul tree, a lane leads off with a row of stalls selling flowers, embroidered cloths, cotton caps, pictorial calendars and incense sticks for devotees and pilgrims – and visitors who must also negotiate their way past a line of alms-seeking faqirs or baksheesh demanding beggars. The lane ends at the gateway of the dargah. Though painted green with a white dome surmounting it, it has an unmistakeable Tughlaq-period look about it, and was indeed built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1373.'

This book is important because it focuses attention on one of the great treasures of Delhi. Of course, one cannot expect the slumbering Archaeological Survey of India to be roused by such exposure. It is the visitor to Delhi and the inhabitants who have been provided a beautiful album of photographs of the urban gems of which most of us seem unaware. If more visitors were to see these villages, it is possible that a growing pressure may nudge the Archaeological Survey to turn its eye onto these areas. One may cringe a little at the price of Rs 650, but it is worth saving for: I am sure it will be hard to locate just a year from now.

Romi Khosla

**BETWEEN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts** edited by Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996.

AMONG the activities of disciplinary literary studies in the academy, none, arguably, has closer or more immediate relevance to the questions of theory and politics it raises, than translation. Theoretically, translation draws upon – even as it illuminates – post-structuralist concerns with

origins, meaning, truth, *differance* or states of betweenness. The political issues are related to the power relations that circulate in the work of translation – as in all transactions between cultures – and therefore domination, violence, mediation, negotiation, resistance, subversion and hybridity are the terms of its analysis. This volume takes on board a range of these concerns, hoping to exemplify thereby the state of the art in translation studies: it succeeds, and the result is an admirably useful, comprehensive, and up-to-date map of the terrain. Dingwaney and Maier are earnest, politically correct and hard-working editors, and if their collection is also predictable and just a shade boring, it is because of these virtues.

Following a short introduction by Dingwaney, the essays are grouped under five heads: Translators on Translating Across Cultures; (Not) Translating Across Cultures; Examining Translations and Cross-Cultural Encounters; Translation, Pedagogy, and Cross-Cultural Texts; and Responses (to the previous essays). Dingwaney's introductory essay, 'Translating "Third World" Cultures', and Maier's essay in the first section, 'Toward a Theoretical Practice for Cross-Cultural Translation', provide the frames for the discussion, primarily by relating the narrow work of textual translation to the larger contemporary politics of transculturalism and multiculturalism and by embedding it within the protocols of ethnography and anthropology. Dingwaney is alert to the 'violence' involved in re-creating the 'other' (text), to the likelihood of mis-translation arising from different frames of reference or from forms of sanctioned ignorance, and to the biases that structure the choice – and exclusion – of texts for translation into the metropolitan languages. All the same, she urges, translation is sustained by the liberal belief in the need for and possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

The 'good' translation (by this I mean not the 'successful' translation so much as the correctly-inspired one) allows itself to be, is in fact open to being, interrogated, 'radically disrupted', and transformed by the 'other' (language/culture), instead of seeking to reduce the foreign text to its own values and structures. She goes on to stress the significance of the 'between' in the title of the volume, which refers to 'the space... where the self or one culture encounters, and, more importantly, *interacts* with an "other" or another culture' (emphasis in original). This in-between space is designated, too unquestioningly, in ritual obedience to Homi Bhabha's persuasive argument about the colonial moment, as hybrid, uncertain, ambivalent: hence, subversive. The 'good' translation is also marked by self-consciousness, self-reflexivity and the commitment to not rendering the act and product of translation transparent. It therefore insists upon the translator's location, his/her powers and privileges, and the intransigence of the translated text, instead of making all of these (traditional obstacles) disappear.

Maier's essay covers much the same ground in reviewing recent theoretical work on translation and concludes with a highlighting of the two notions that she regards as most essential for 'good' translation: intimacy and inquiry. 'Intimacy' is elaborated by Gayatri Spivak as the translators' unique relationship with the language of the text that will allow for its specificity to be retained in the translated context; in its absence she proposes a 'withholding' of translation, a scrupulous silence. Maier qualifies Spivak's strict injunctions by arguing that despite the asymmetrical power relations that mark cultural exchanges, it is possible to approach translation as a 'humbling, disconcerting' experience. Bhabha's hybridity, and other theorists' corresponding valorization of Creole-ness, she suggests, may be roped in to refuse purity and primacy to the hegemonic (colonizer's) language in translation work. 'Inquiry' is the examination of the 'frames' or contexts within which languages and cultures are produced, in order to help translation become self-aware and careful. Maier concludes that translation must be both preceded and followed by 'learning'.

As my paraphrase of these opening introductory essays would have already suggested, the positions of the editors are still significantly inscribed in the language of (liberal) faith in humanism, equality and knowledge-as-value, which is in curious tension, if not actual contradiction, with the post-structuralist concepts (anti-humanism, difference; and knowledge-as-power if not impossibility) that litter their exposition: an implicit argument, in short, between the (actual?) possibility of translation and its (theoretical?) impossibility. It would have been more interesting and productive had the editors chosen to acknowledge the first as an *ethics* of translation by developing the idiom of love, intimacy, humility, responsibility, bridging of difference, understanding and universality that they seem irresistibly drawn to, into a rigorous theory of translation.

It would be tedious to comment on all the remaining eighteen or so essays in the volume. I shall pick on a handful – two because of their likely interest for readers in India, and two others because they are written by the volume's 'star' contributors. Agha Shahid Ali's *The Rebel's Silhouette: Translating Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, is a charming and lively account, autobiographical, technical and interspersed with sample stanzas of translation, of how this work was produced. Simply at the level of anecdote, Ali satisfies our curiosity about his involvement with Faiz (primarily via his infatuation with Begum Akhtar's rendering of Faiz's ghazals); but his exposition of the difficulties he encountered and the strategies he employed to overcome them while translating the poems will absorb anyone in the trade. It also establishes that translation is an act of love and homage first, of challenges met and overcome only next.

In an essay titled *A Gift of Tamil*, Paula Richman and Norman Cutler describe the production of an anthology of translations from Tamil literature that they compiled in

honour of Professor K. Paramasivam, a scholar and teacher of Tamil in Madurai. This essay is mainly in the nature of a self-reflexive take on the project, performed with what appears to be newly-acquired theoretical wisdom and the privilege of hindsight. This kind of self-critique has virtually now become a critical genre, both tiresome and disingenuous. Thus the authors disarmingly conclude that they had not understood that 'behind the debates about book section titles, the morass of transliteration issues, and the extensive discussions about who should be permitted to sit on the dias (at the book-release ceremony honouring Professor Paramasivam), there were unacknowledged cultural assumptions which were structuring conflicting alternatives.' But there is no indication whether they would have done any of it differently had the cultural assumptions been absent – if such a thing were possible – or acknowledged; they merely hope that other anthologies may find their reflections 'operative in significant ways.' It is not only that for a *mea culpa* (for, paradoxically, a state of innocence!) this conclusion sounds far too complacent. It has also allowed the occlusion of any consideration of the politics of area studies, the pervasive presence of the American Institute of Indian Studies in this enterprise, the perception of the role of Paramasivam and such employees as 'native informants', in other words, of the *institutional* conditions of knowledge production: not necessarily a sinister operation, but undeniably a political and historical one, and as such of relevance to the exercise they set out to perform.

Edward Said's essay, *Embargoed Literature* (a reprint), is strictly not about translation issues at all. True, Said grumbles about the absence of translations of contemporary Arabic literatures in the metropolitan languages and their consequent ignorance or slighting. But puzzlingly, he then goes on to produce a long list of recent translated texts. Presumably then his complaint is really about their lack of readership (but then, would the translations be kept up?), or the absence of critical attention in the metropolis (where it matters?). Curiously, too, his brief descriptions of the texts draw their terms from the styles, genres, movements and authors of the West – terms such as 'surreal', 'postmodern', 'Jamesian', 'Joycean'. This descriptive shorthand either demonstrates the derivativeness of the textual modes of contemporary Arabic literature or is a sad sign of Said's inability to think outside of western literary categories.

I shall end with Talal Asad's response, *A Comment on Translation, Critique and Subversion*. Asad questions the possibility and extent of postcolonial literary subversion via translation, and he does this by introducing an entirely new set of issues related to what people 'do', rather than what they 'think' (i.e. culture). He considers the impact of the translation of western texts on Egyptian culture by examining a range of 'social practices: law, banking, public administration, education, health, accounting, insurance,

policing, war, mass communication, natural sciences;’ and he judges it be immense. Ostensibly this new knowledge inserts postcolonial societies into ‘modern world culture.’ Translation, in both directions, serves as the sign of access to the modern and entry *into* the modern. The norm is metropolitan capitalist culture.

There is a great deal of translation and discussion of translation going on in India today and while the concerns expressed in this volume are not identical with those that animate us, they are not without interest or relevance to translators and theorists here. Those of us who have been attending (too many) symposia on the subject may have begun to feel that we haven’t advanced very far in what we argue about or how we argue about them. A comparative perspective may well turn out to be rewarding.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan

**LIFE ON THE SCREEN: Identity in the Age of The Internet** by Sherry Turkle. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996.

THERE can be little question about the transformation of everyday life in the West after the personal computer revolution of the 1980s. With the internet explosion of the 1990s computers have introduced a new set of techno-social practices that cannot be explained by old 19th century paradigms of technology. Those views were based on critiques of technological monuments (the dam, the steel mill) which were implicated in violence and displacement. Now while computers and the cultural experiences they have generated are not entirely free from the old co-ordinates, it is evident that a new set of questions need to be asked about the new techno-cultural constellation.

This is exactly what Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen* does. In fact *Life on the Screen* has very little to say about technology itself – we are instead presented with an original ethnography of computer culture in the West as a popular, complicated set of practices that impact on bodies, identities and their relationship to machines. Turkle’s earlier work, *The Second Self, Computers and the Human Spirit*, was seminal in raising early questions about computing and identity; *Life on the Screen* is a wide ranging analysis of contemporary computer culture.

Turkle is not theoretically unsophisticated – there are references to the works of Fredric Jameson, Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, Jacques Lacan and the obligatory nod to Foucault. Thankfully this is not a cultural studies style bibliographic attack: the theoretical discussions are embedded in an almost conversational, easy discussions of computer practices. The canvas is wide: Turkle discusses identity politics and MUDS (multi user dungeons, a game) in the internet, computer architecture, the politics of the interface, the body-machine relationship and the fate of Cartesian ontology, and the sexual politics of the internet.

Crucial to an understanding of the computer revolution, says Turkle, is the emergence of ‘post-modern cultural practices’. The old computers were based on the architectonics of classical modernism: they were large, cold and discouraged play. Central to this principle was a separation of the user and the machine: the design principles followed the functionality of 20th century modernism. IBM and the earlier generation of computer design followed this principle: the preferred language DOS, was intimidating and scientific for new users who had to memorise commands to enter computer culture.

The important transition, says Turkle, came about in the 1980s, the same time various self-representations of the epoch as ‘post-modern’ became current. In the computer world, the arrival of the Macintosh, or the Mac as it was popularly known, signalled the transition to a post-modern architecture. The Macs were based on a user friendly interface that privileged visuality and play. In contrast to the arid modernism of the IBM screen, Mac screens were based on simple icons that could be moved around with a mouse. Users were encouraged to *touch* (through the mouse) and play with the machine. The visual surface gained priority over the mysteries of the inner core of the computer (central to modernism). While the modernist system privileged experts (who alone could understand the inner logic of the computer) the post-modern techno-practice rendered a deep knowledge of the computer by ordinary users irrelevant. The result: computers have securely become part of popular culture in the West: the new Windows interface is a derivative of the Macintosh design.

There is much in Turkle’s book for a critical entry into discussions of computer culture: an interesting analysis of identity politics in the internet (anonymity in the network has led users to play with their sexuality on screen), psychoanalysis and the politics of computer culture, loneliness and solidarity in networks. The big problem in the book: a somewhat populist espousal of a post-modern ‘model’ – where difference, play and fragmentation are seen somewhat upproblematically as heralding tremendous possibilities in techno-practice. This seems to be a tendency in much North American literature of recent vintage. Apart from being somewhat simplistic (perhaps this reflects old American pragmatist yearnings) we can point out the great silences in much of recent discussions of computer culture. This is the absence of any reference to those areas in the periphery of the western world – those forsaken geographies, where the popular techno-culture of the West morphs into an elite imaginary.

But this would be too much to demand from a book like *Life on the Screen*. Turkle’s work is based on an analysis of western computer culture and within those limits it remains one of the best available today. One only hopes a cheaper paperback edition is soon available to Indian readers.

Ravi Sundaram

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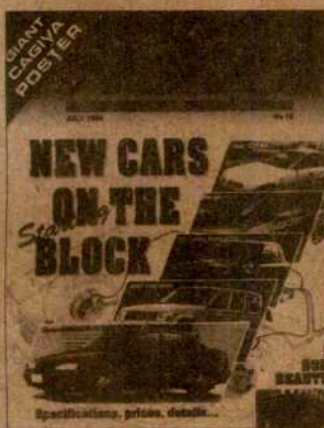
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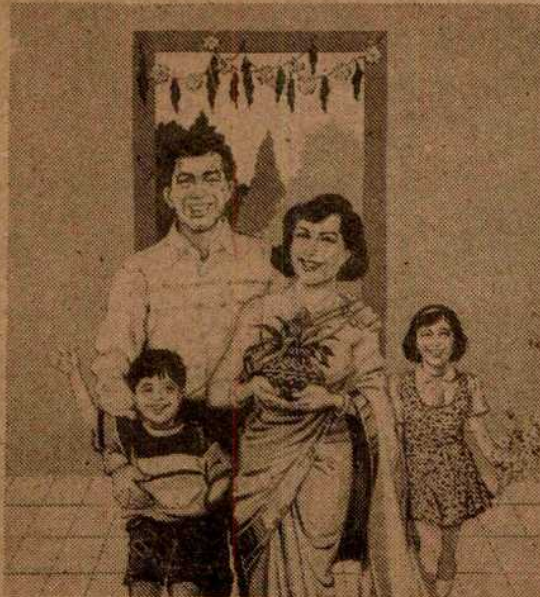
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# Communications

DEMOCRACY and development are at the core of the modern liberal state and hence are the core values of modernity. For us in the non-western world these values arouse deep anxieties, particularly about their universality. The critiques of such universal values are often pushed to define either local specific versions of the same or risk being culturally and politically relativised. In some quarters universalities of any kind are viewed with suspicion because of their links with many modern forms of violence. I talk here of universalisms as a deeply held commitment to certain important features of modern industrial life itself. A commitment to universal knowledge is one such feature relevant to my comments on Amita Baviskar's essay, 'Who Speaks for the Victims?' (SEMINAR 451, March 1997).

I have a fictional story of the Narmada Bachao Andolan to tell her. A dream actually. In my dream, I visit the Andolan, for reasons that are not very clear; perhaps to report for a newspaper or to write a Ph.D. thesis, or to translate some Adivasi folklore into Tamil. On arrival I am ferried across the Narmada to the office of the NBA. I cross the Narmada in an inflatable dinghy fitted with an outboard motor. I smile and remark to the activist accompanying me that in most of the coastal villages in Tamil Nadu following the fishermen's agitation, the government had provided them with subsidised outboard engines to be fitted to their catamarans, as though what the fisherfolk wanted was membership into the technocratic entrepreneurial community.

When I arrive I am astonished to find that the house of Budibhen has been turned into a memorial

which people worship and the office of the NBA is itself a polyester/nylon tent usually used by campers, very sleek and modern with collapsible mini tables, storage pouches etc. Then my dream fades and I am left with a mystery – to interpret my dream. Where did these tents, outboards and inflatable dinghies come from? Who are these visitors from outer space who have left behind these odds and ends of American wilderness lovers' culture?

Let me speculate.

NBA evokes a powerful combination of images in the modern mind – of a woman, a vast river, of verdant forests, of pristine tribes, creation myths and forms of life we avidly want to hear about. The NBA offers a locale for primordial dissent. It brings together nature lovers, naxalites, Marxists, pedagogues and most significantly, anthropologists – little Verrier Elwins drawn to the moving struggle of tribes living outside the Hindu mainstream. It brings the far away struggle of lonely tribes fighting for survival into the Ph.D. proposals of national and international universities.

If the Bhopal disaster was the most important issue for technologists and lawyers, alternative and otherwise, which made toxic research, toxic information banks and networks, resistance to TNCs and the new 'science' of disaster management respectable and legitimate, the NBA does the same for ecologists, bird watchers, hydrologists and anthropologists. I cannot recall any anthropologist being interested in Bhopal or even coming there. I met plenty of IIT radicals, environmental engineers, appropriate technologists and many medicos but no anthropologists or historians,



prompting Shiv Visvanathan to comment that Bhopal has been a failure of the moral imagination of the Indian intellectual.

As if not to repeat this failure of the moral imagination there seems to be – for instance, in the departments of anthropology of the Delhi School of Economics, SOAS, Berkeley – a new vitalised interest in the life of the tribes like the Mundas, Oroans and others. What stakes do these institutions and the research students have in the lives of these people? Are they the ones who hear the voices of these victims?

The student academic is the most important defender and beneficiary of the modern universal education system. As the latest visitor to these parts he/she brings with him/her the light that will make visible, far away and little known communities to the university system and it is important to be aware of the implications of this. Anthropologists who do field-work in tribal and rural India are not new: they have always been coming and going but what is different is that a new generation of them today speak about the violence of integration, the violence of modern justice and jurisprudence, of development and of course the violence of the national state. They let their own selves be deeply touched by the life of the Mundas or the Santhals and a few even carry that disturbing experience for the rest of their lives.

But they almost always refer to their acquaintances made during field-work as 'informants' and they always conjecture or refute opinions within the paradigms of the university traditions; of their particular academic tradition. I use the word academic and not scholastic because they are not practioners of social knowledge, but at best are internal critics of universal knowledge. And they rarely contribute to the growth of anything but this universal knowledge.

Neither scholarship nor studentship are alien traditions to India. What is new, however, are two developments in the culture and politics of knowledge in our times. The first is the emergence of a domain of universal knowledge – rational, objective and historical. The modern university is its monopolistic repository. The second development goes hand in hand with the first – the emergence of a class of guardians of such knowledge – the professional academic, whose destiny is inextricably and, to be fair to those more sensitive, often painfully linked to careers in the university system. All the anthropological writing on the Bhilalas, for instance, add to the growth of self-corrective and critical traditions in anthropology but they do not add a single word to the creation myths of the Bhilalas. They report movingly and poignantly on the Bhilala universe, its lack of anthropocentrism, its concepts of tragedy and love, of joy and suffering, but they add little to it as lived knowledge. It is in this context that I want to

refract some of the issues raised by Amita Baviskar to the world of the academic and the university.

Authenticity is an issue not only to the culturally insecure as Baviskar seems to think. It is an issue central to the university system. But it is difficult to see this as the very essence of universal knowledge. After all we are educated in the matter of 'truth' and not in the matter of 'practice'. According to this demand for an 'authentic morality' by the university, the world of the Bhilalas are their own and the world of the academy is that of the student's. And authentic morality demands that the moral choices of individuals are made within compatible moral worlds. Any disregard of this cannon, we learn, is inauthentic and one can think of many tragic tales of misplaced revolutionary fervour when such choices are made within incompatible worlds. Amita Baviskar hints at exactly such tragedy when she speaks of the activist as the confused but well intentioned interlocutor who stands at the existential gateway of the Adivasi's speech. The academic who stands at a similar gateway too has a more profound question to answer. Does he/she listen to the Adivasi? How can such listening be a way of mutual self-affirmation for him/her and the Adivasi? In the final analysis we ask: what is listening if it is to be something more than adding one more chapter in the annals of universal knowledge?

The question can be posed in an other way. The preoccupation with authenticity is indeed a disease of luxury, a psychosomatic privilege of people who need not worry about survival. Who is more privileged among us? A diploma holder in steel fabrication from a government school in the backwaters of Tamil Nadu or a doctoral graduate from the Delhi School of Economics? An illiterate son of an Adivasi or a university graduate? Who has to worry about survival? The answer is obvious. Luxury and privilege is certainly more constitutive of the world of the professional academic than the activist. But what disturbs is her claim that 'among poor Adivasis there is much less agonising about identity and authenticity' because of a greater concern with the nitty-gritty of life.

The idea that identity and authenticity are not the nitty-gritty of life is something universal knowledge consistently propagates. With its unidimensional notion of well-being (which is mainly economic), universal knowledge cannot capture this loss of identity, place, space, meaning and familiarity caused by displacement except under categories of romanticism and sentimentalism, rehabilitation and compensation. It cannot comprehend this loss properly because it fundamentally separates social analysis from personal lifestyles, morals from facts and cognition from practice. While cultures change and peoples adapt, the emissaries of universal knowledge rarely struggle for



survival – they just fit in. Committed to such universal knowledge, she is unable to feel the full import of such loss which is precisely the source of commitment to the transcendental choices many activists make. To state in her own language, she lacks an awareness of the anthropology of suffering.

I have deliberately pushed the worlds of the academic, of universal knowledge and the worlds of the activist, of social practice, to opposing poles in order to bring to the fore some standard clichés in the writings on Adivasis and on modern suffering in general. Baviskar invokes two such clichés. One is that of struggle, the other of hope. The 'authentic morality' of universal knowledge asserts that both the activist and the academic have different roles to play in the 'collective struggle for the transformation of the state.' A division of labour, a mutuality of struggle, which ensures the participation of the university in the world of the Adivasi. This is called the consensus about development. Why should there be a consensus about development if indeed, as the activists think, it is this development which is responsible for destroying the lives of the poor? While the academic struggles for equitable development, the poor struggle against development itself in all its forms. It is this agenda of the poor and the activist that Amita Baviskar is blind towards.

This blindness, I suggest, is caused by the other cliché that is as frequently invoked – that of hope: a hope for a more equitable and just state. It is customary for Marxists to distinguish between state power and authority. While the power of the state could be wrongly construed, misused or abused, modern minds fight shy of resisting state authority in its essence. And the 'semblance of concern the state shows for those it destroys' is read as the class character of the state, whereas it is really doing so in order to gain legitimacy. I suggest that this contractual theory of state and society, which is at the bottom of such an attitude towards the state is a fiction and has none or only a learnt/forced correspondence in reality. When the modern state shares power or shows concern, it is first and foremost executing its agenda of liberal democracy. When it destroys livelihoods and compensates for the destruction, it is still executing the same agenda. Providing agitating fishermen with outboard motors is not an act of showing false concern. It is fundamental to the commitment of destroying their survival base and turning them into technocratic entrepreneurs or integrating them into the industrial workforce.

In this sense the state is Janus-faced only for those who are its beneficiaries and participate, however implicitly, in its modernising agenda. Contrary to Baviskar's belief it is not simultaneously the 'highest hope and the deepest terror' of everyone. It is the

'highest hope' of the academic, the westernised and modernising intelligentsia, the contracting citizen, while it is the 'deepest terror' of the displaced Adivasi. In our part of the world, the intellectual community which has no real experience of state terror almost always projects the terror unleashed by the national state of Nazi Germany, the McCarthy years in the United States, or repression in other third world military regimes into its own experience. We rarely hear of (apart from the Emergency years of Indira Gandhi) examples of state terrorism against the intelligentsia by any traditional state, not even by the colonial state. Artists and intellectuals share a victimhood with Adivasis in the Prague Spring not in Narmada, Jharkhand or the Western Ghats.

It is perhaps this 'hope' for a 'struggle' to transform the state and represent a 'consensus on development' which prevents Amita Baviskar from grasping the most important thing an activist should symbolise for us, something which she mentions but fails to ultimately grasp in the context of the *real struggle between dying worlds and triumphant systems*. It is something which easily eludes those of us shaped by the industrial system based on universal knowledge – the act of giving up material rewards. It is an act of choosing a life where one knows that one will never own a car or a house, and one's children will probably have to study in government schools or not at all. The consequence of a choice where life is forever a hand-to-mouth existence, a constant pain of not knowing what traditions one belongs to has to be imagined.

And this perhaps answers the mysteries which my dream raised – the inflatable dinghies and camp tents in the Narmada have been left behind by visitors from 'outer space' who seek a life which is fundamentally sceptical towards a life of subsistence (to borrow a phrase from Ivan Illich). Many of these visitors from 'outer space' believe that such a life in the domain of subsistence lacks an intellectual and cultural base and hence is an anachronism in the onward march of history. Still other visitors believe that a life of subsistence is a vanishing proposition and hence best abandoned. In the final analysis, as students of universal knowledge, we lack the courage and conviction to live this life of subsistence. Living in an agrarian country like India and closer to nature or what is left of it, a scepticism towards the life of subsistence is to support the '500 year war against subsistence' (borrowing once again from Illich). Sadly, as victims of what Illich calls, mimetic desire, we are, to use Goddard's famous phrase, here and yet elsewhere.

Let me end with another story. Recently I argued with a young Palestinian about Palestine, imperialism and so on. He was of the opinion that pacifism in the face of violence is of no use. He

demanding that violence be met with equally ruthless violence, no matter the consequence on one's inner self. He was aware of how violence is often a violence against one's own self and was himself a victim of it.

But he chose to drive home his point with the remark that Gandhi's pacifism only took him to the negotiating table at London and did little for Indian independence. What did Gandhi going to the two Round Table Conferences really achieve, he wanted to know. Unable to answer with the same intensity, I offered a very personal reply. In the famous photograph of Gandhi and the British PM on the steps of Westminster or in the famous quote of Churchill, 'the half-naked fakir,' a point comes home to us which we rarely dwell upon: Would we visit London in winter with nothing but a *langoti*, I asked.

In an uncompromising and unobtrusive way, the image of Gandhi weathering the English cold in his loin cloth tells us that other choices and other ways of life, at once personal and public, exist just beyond the realm of the possible. The activist represents the domain of such choices. The innumerable Sarvodaya workers who gave up lucrative careers to work in the villages of Saurashtra made those choices. So did a number of communists in Kerala, those in the Dalit Sangarsh Samiti of Karnataka, as also quite a few unheroic individuals who just want no truck with the life-choices offered by modern careers in the metropolis. Again, there are those who refuse to fall for the lure of commercial cropping in western Karnataka and prefer to live a life closer to what would be called subsistence, simply because they are quite satisfied with the minimum comforts such a life offers.

If all of us made such choices, Gandhi would surely suggest if he were alive, we would develop a formidable force for subsistence. He would insist that soul force must be uncompromisingly located in the domain of subsistence. To give up material comforts and to live by one's conscience and to so live with a passion is an immemorial tradition in India. This is of course extremely difficult in *Kaliyuga* or the age of development. But as we all know, *yugapurushas* are those who try to live constantly beyond what the immediate life seems to offer.

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GIVEN the rise of a large market for books in India over the last ten years, the world of scholarship is developing a new division of labour between those who write books and those who review them. The dichotomy is not water-tight; nor perhaps will it ever be. But as an

increasingly larger number of books are published, which then are reviewed in many more magazines, newspapers and journals than ever before, editors find it hard to continue to get specialists to write reviews. As a result, many intellectuals have developed a niche in the market by specializing in writing book reviews. They manage to review books ranging from political economy on the one hand to fiction and culture on the other.

In some circles, this sort of intellectual proteanism is considered a sign of breadth. And to an extent, in an age increasingly marked by specialization, such breadth should be welcomed. But there is also a danger lurking underneath. Having too broad a canvas drives one towards the opposite of specialization: a belief that one can get deep inside arguments without keeping abreast of research in the field. In an unseemly return of an old proverb, some academics call such reviewers jacks of all trades, but masters of none. That is perhaps an unfortunate development, for the specialists can learn much from those who can reflect widely and well. In another sense, however, the reasons for academic anguish, are quite comprehensible. Proteanism can hardly keep track of the rising volume of research and of the twists and turns in intellectual debates: it makes the temptation to rely on older, conventional articles of intellectual faith only too strong. A combination of breadth and depth, a worthy intellectual project for many, remains elusive, though its need is manifestly evident in an era of increasing specialization.

Consider Harsh Sethi's review of my book, *Democracy, Development and the Countryside* (DDC hereafter) in SEMINAR (March 1997, pp. 71-2).

With surprising taxonomic ease, Sethi first places DDC in an intellectual and political school that, according to him, has 'tried to privilege the urban-rural axis as the fulcrum of our political economy.' He, then, identifies why an urban-rural axis 'holds little explanatory power.' 'To not give analytic significance,' he says, 'to the basic contradictions between the landed and the landless, or absentee landowners and the rest, classifying all of them as bound by a common interest, is unsustainable.' (p. 71)

In their classic formulations, urban bias theorists like Michael Lipton indeed came close to making claims that Sethi identifies and rightly critiques. But those arguments were made popular by Michael Lipton and Robert Bates in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Much research has taken place since then. My book, if anything, has been a critique of these older views. In a special issue (July 1993) of *The Journal of Development Studies* (JDS hereafter) which I guest-edited and which was later published as a book entitled *Beyond Urban Bias* (Frank Cass, London, 1993), I put together a series of scholars who had conducted

research on the urban-rural linkages and conflicts in the mid- to late 1980s (Jennifer Widner, Mick Moore, Jean Oi, Forrest Colburn, and myself). All were critical, though in different ways, of urban bias theories. Michael Lipton and Robert Bates wrote long responses to our articles. Sethi does not appear to have seen research appearing in JDS, a journal where a lot of the work on urban-rural political economy has appeared since the 1970s.

Was the JDS debate necessary to reviewing my book? Sethi might plausibly say that my book should stand on its own. Here is how I concluded my account of the attempts made in India to mobilize the countryside on higher agricultural prices and subsidies in the 1970s and 1980s: 'To conclude, while price agitations cannot be considered to be class-driven in the narrow sense of furthering the interests of rich peasantry, they do not unambiguously serve the interests of the entire sector either. They embrace most of the landed peasantry, but whether the landless also benefit remains questionable. Since up to 20 per cent of rural India is landless, a significant section of Bharat, in all probability, does not gain from these agitations. If wages do go up in the long run, a benefit will have accrued; meanwhile, everyday difficulties are likely to overpower any future hope.' (DDC, p. 138)

I hope the reader is as confused as I am about how Sethi manages to place me in the urban bias camp that posited unity in urban and rural sectors. Indeed, the basic argument of the book, which he never summarizes for the reader, makes it very clear that the countryside is not only disunited but is unlikely to be united: 'In the ultimate analysis, rural power is self-limiting. For the farmers to push the state and economic policy more in their favour, they must present themselves as a cohesive force united on economic interests (expressed as higher producer prices, larger subsidies, and greater investment). ...Although politics based on economic demands is stronger than before, politics based on other cleavages – caste, ethnicity, religion – also continues to be vibrant. ... (P)olitics based on (these) identities divides (the countryside), for caste, ethnicity and religion cut across the urban and the rural. There are Hindu villagers and Hindu urbanites, Muslim peasants and Muslim urban professionals; and "backward castes" are found in cities and villages. ...The ultimate constraint on rural power thus may not be the "urban bias" of the power structure, as the influential urban-bias theorists (Lipton, Bates, Schultz) have argued. It may well stem from how human beings perceive themselves – as people having multiple selves.' (DDC, p.4, parenthesis added)

Do I present a united rural India above? Do I elsewhere in the book? I indeed talk about its economic possibilities in theory but then most of my argument is

about its political difficulties in practice. As a student of politics, I also take quite seriously the sectoral construction of politics by many of rural India's leaders – from Charan Singh and Devi Lal to Sharad Joshi, M.S. Tikait and Nanjundaswamy. Talking theoretically about the conditions under which rural unity is possible is not the same as agreeing to its empirical validity. Nor is taking sectoral politics seriously equal to agreeing with Sharad Joshi or Charan Singh. The project of a united rural India can be realized, I argue, if and only if all farmers see themselves as economically benefiting from higher agricultural subsidies and prices, and also press their role as farmers in politics to the exclusion of their identities as members of caste or religious communities. This formulation, if anything, demonstrates how hard it is to unite the countryside. Sethi misses this key argument of the book completely.

A key difference between Sethi and me concerns the role of class in rural political economy. While I do talk of rural disunity, I do not conceptualize rural differences primarily in class terms. Sethi is sure why I do the latter: because, he says, 'entertaining the class dimension would diminish the claim of unified rural interests.'

This is an odd claim. Is a class-based conception of differences strictly necessary to undermine the claim of rural unity? A caste-based conceptualization can also do that. To me, caste differences are central to understanding rural politics of the last two decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, caste complications made it hard to put together larger coalitions in the name of rural India, and since the late 1980s, political mobilization has in any case been explicitly launched in the name of social justice in much of north India. Beyond West Bengal and Kerala, class has been a minor theme of interest-identification by the rural folk. The salience of class is recognized more in Delhi than on the ground. Moreover, as more and more studies of class-based mobilization appear, we are also beginning to understand that successful class mobilization in the countryside may require a fusion of caste and class motifs.

Studies of Kerala published in the 1980s and 1990s by Dilip Menon and T.J. Nossiter as well as the earlier primary accounts of class-mobilization written by E.M.S. Namboodiripad demonstrate that the success of Kerala communism was heavily premised upon the ability of the left-wing of the Congress party in the 1930s and 1940s to plug into the caste-based social justice programme of Ezhavas, a caste that was close to the bottom of caste hierarchy, was denied many of the basic human rights, had developed a middle class in the 1910s and 1920s and a self-respect movement under Sri Narayan Guru. At least in rural India (and arguably elsewhere), class is not a cultural community, rich with symbols, folklore and history; it is an intellectual and,

sometimes, a political construct. Contrariwise, castes have been in existence for centuries with oral or written histories, and a rich symbolic repertoire experienced in everyday life. Castes, in other words, are communities; classes are not. That is why it is so much easier to see one's interests in caste terms in rural India. That is also why castes are so readily deployable in politics. It is time to give up the left-wing article of faith that classes are natural and caste divisions simply a form of false consciousness. Something that is false cannot go on mobilizing millions of people repeatedly for decades in so many parts of India.

A final point should further illustrate how hastily Sethi uses terms and categorizes arguments. Sethi argues that 'in these days of postmodernism, one expects all analytical categories and metanarratives to be subjected to an incisive unpacking' – a charge that he levels on the urban-rural dichotomy which, he rightly says, one should not 'uncritically accept'. But for him to also later call class 'the real cleavage marking our countryside' beats theoretical comprehension! Postmodernists have long dropped 'class' as a valid category of analysis, calling it a 'metanarrative' that modernity invented and imposed upon realities that were more local, more imbued with a sense of community, history, and quotidian experience. An example of the relegation of the category of 'class' is the recent, 'subaltern' historiography, inspired by and large by postmodernism. With a few exceptions, this historiography has focused on communities that more closely approximate, or confront, the experience of most Indians: caste, tribe, language and communalism. Sethi seems to be in such a hurry to use terms and label arguments that he does not see his own theoretical inconsistencies, nor how the world of empirically driven research has moved in the last two decades.

**Ashutosh Varshney**  
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*Harsh Sethi replies:*

THERE are those who write books and those who review them. Having been neatly slotted in the latter category and as a non-specialist to boot, responding to Ashutosh Varshney's ire is not easy.

Varshney's reaction to my review of his book operates at many levels. To his charge that I have little knowledge of the specialised subject matter of his book, I have no response. His second charge that I have fundamentally misread his book is more serious. He claims, and with some justification, that his position should not be equated with a simplistic urban bias formulation. After all, he is not positing a unified rural universe. But that is hardly my case.

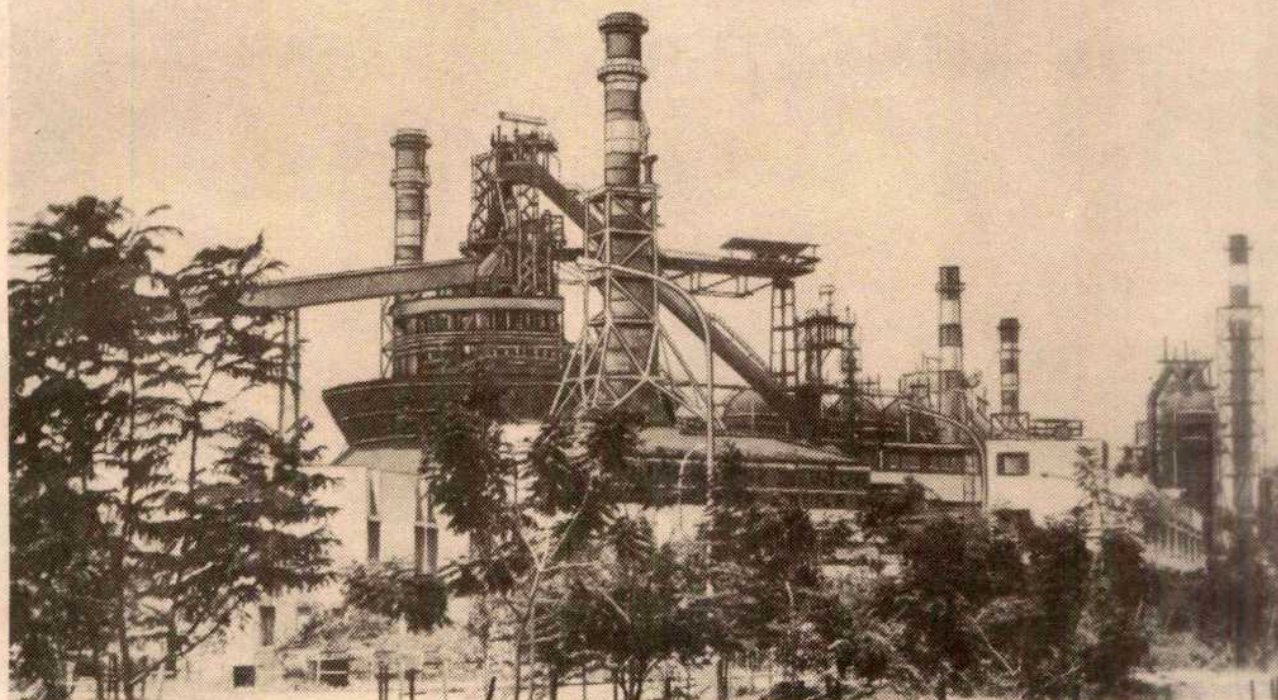
My differences with Varshney stem from my reading of the history of agricultural policy formulation in India. Unlike him, I would argue that the policies of the '50s and early '60s – the land reform, cooperatives and institutional reform framework advocated in the Nehru years – though limited, was needed. Rather than represent a bias against the rural, it facilitated the growth of the emerging backward class peasant proprietor. Second, the green revolution strategy of focusing investments in areas and on farmers who were in a position to make use of the new technological opportunities gave rise to both negative and positive consequences. Thus while output did dramatically increase, we also witnessed a sharp escalation in class and regional inequalities. Further, as many of the farmers who went in for the new packages slowly realised, their micro-economies was viable only through subsidised inputs (credit, seeds, water, electricity, fertilisers) and steadily increasing procurement prices. Finally, the new strategy led to adverse ecological consequences, a feature that Varshney does not discuss.

I do see the peasant/farmer struggles of the '80s – Sharad Joshi, M.S. Tikait, BKU, Rudrappa Naidu and Nanjundaswamy – as primarily addressed to extracting additional advantages from the state. Slogans like Bharat vs India were attempts to overcome their essentially sectional character. Varshney has provided a range of reasons explaining their mixed success. Much of this has to do with the self-limiting nature of non-party politics, or pressure group politics. What he underplays is the unease of a large strata of the rural populace – not just agrarian labour and poor peasants but also a growing strata of non-farm rural populace, who saw little benefit in a high subsidy, high output price regime. We need to understand why each of these movements/struggles needed to ally with political parties or even themselves enter the arena of electoral politics. Also, why this effort was a failure – not just at the national or state levels, but even at the panchayats. Varshney also needs to explain the differences in policy perspectives between the leaders of Bharat. Surely not because of caste or community. The differences between Tikait and Joshi on the GATT proposals, agricultural exports, involvement of multinational agri-business, patenting of seeds and so on, are fundamental. And they do impact on the politics of the countryside.

I do not wish to list the many issues concerning different strata of our rural society that do not engage Varshney's commentary on democracy, development and the countryside. Incorporating the struggles for wages and employment, to take just one example, may have changed the tenor of his analysis. That is why, more than the Tikait vs Rajiv Gandhi metaphor, I prefer the formulation of the farmers against the state.



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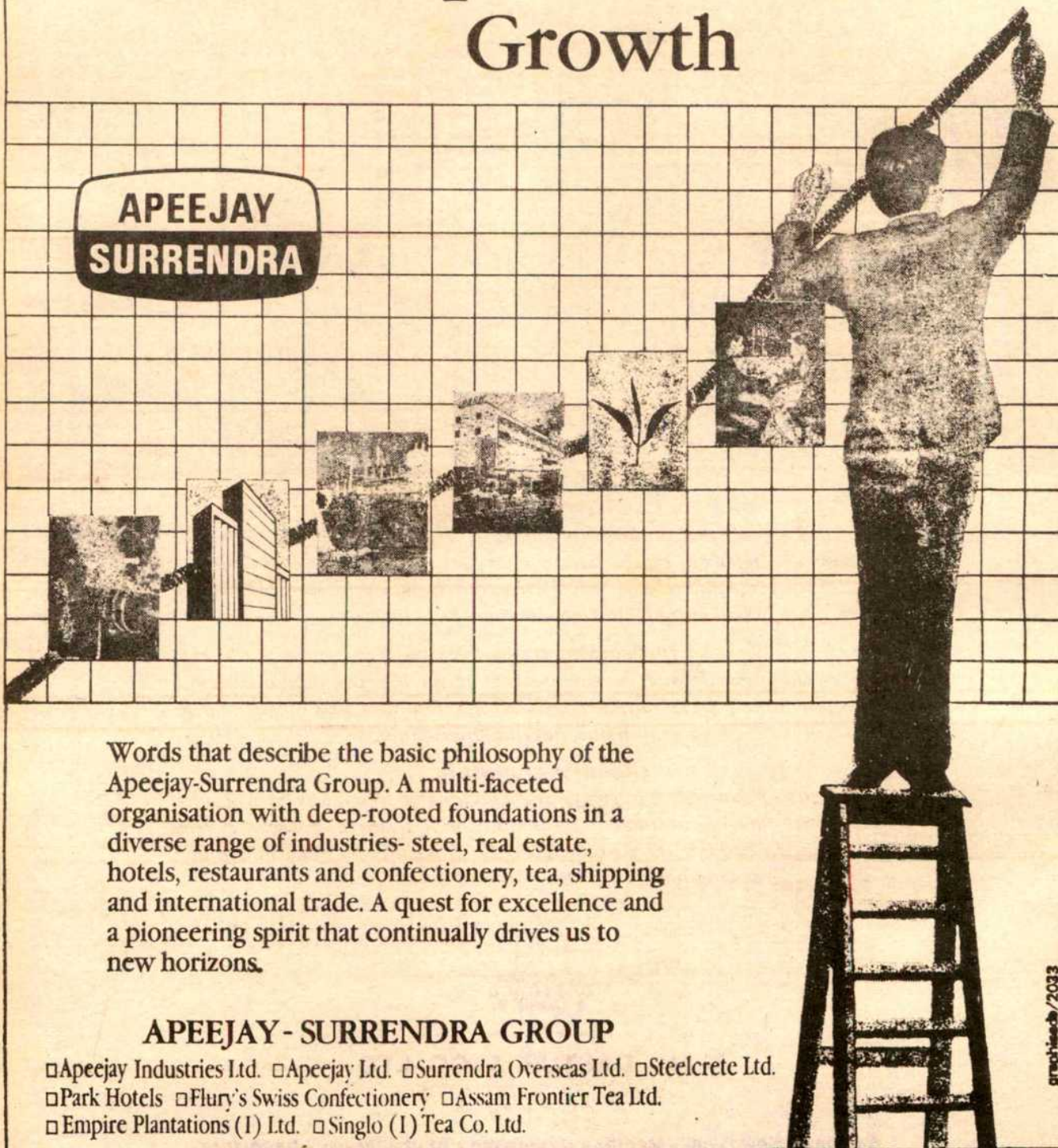
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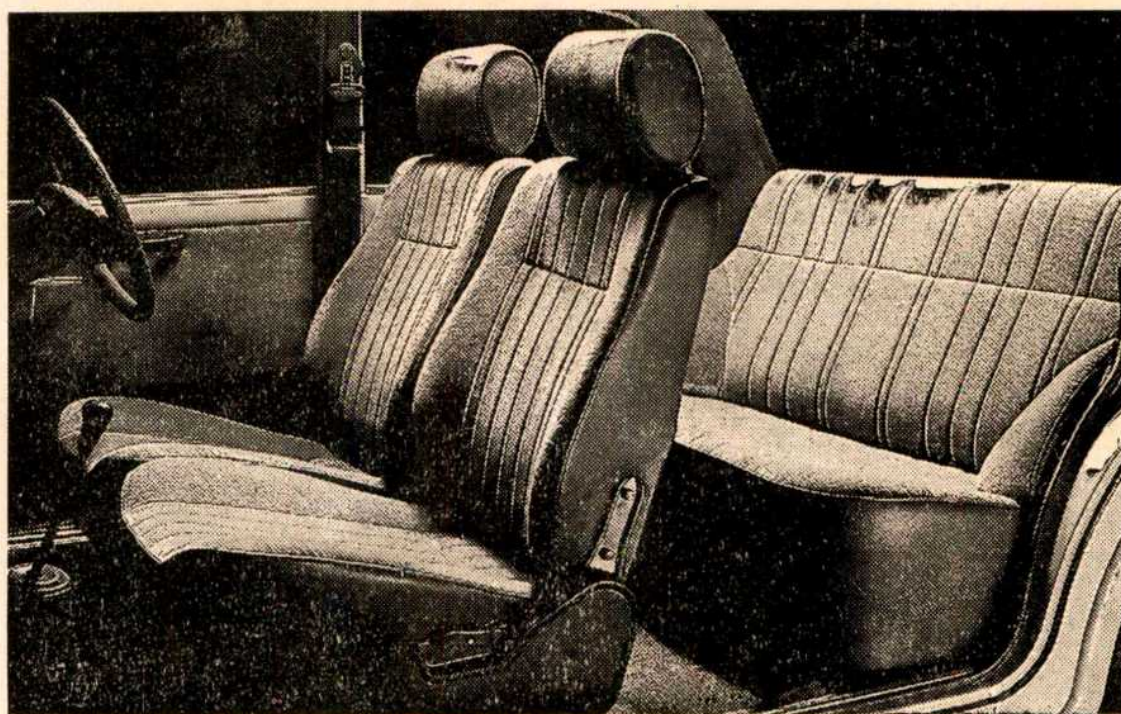
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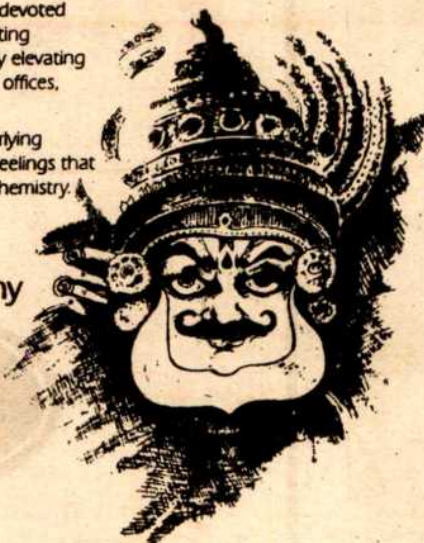
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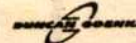


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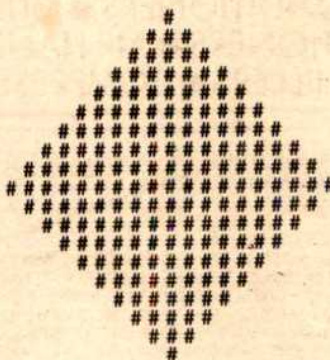
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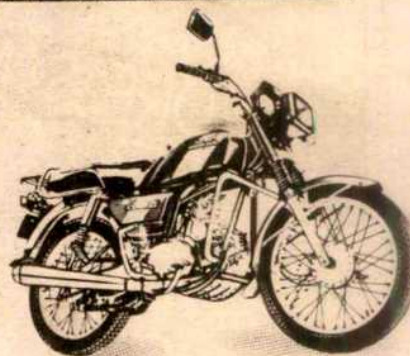


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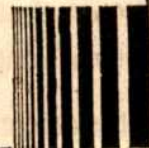
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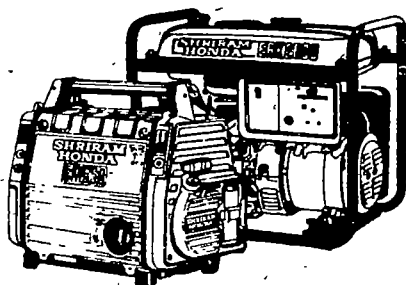
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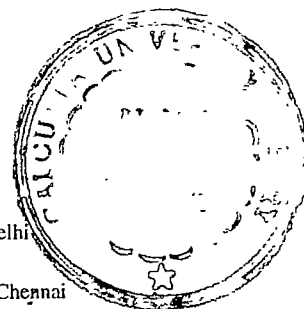
# 454

## POLITICAL EXHAUSTION

a symposium on  
some issues facing  
our polity

### symposium participants

- 12 **THE PROBLEM**  
a short statement on  
the issues involved
- 14 **UNHOLY ALLIANCES**  
Chandan Mitra, Editor, 'The Pioneer', Delhi
- 17 **IN SEARCH OF POLITICAL STABILITY**  
Bhaskar Dutta, Professor, Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi
- 21 **A DEFINING MOMENT**  
Malini Parthasarathy, Executive Editor, 'The Hindu', Chennai
- 24 **WHY WE MUST RETAIN THE  
MAJORITY-MINORITY FRAMEWORK**  
Rajeev Bhargava, teaches at the Centre for Political Studies,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi
- 28 **NATION AND THE REGIONS**  
Javed Alam, Visiting Senior Fellow, Centre for the  
Study of Developing Societies, Delhi
- 31 **LIMITS OF REGIONAL SECTARIANISM**  
Udayon Misra, Professor of English, Dibrugarh University,  
Dibrugarh
- 34 **BEYOND COALITION POLITICS**  
Amaresh Misra, writer and columnist, Allahabad
- 39 **A THIRD FRONT**  
Kumares Chakravarty, columnist; teaches at  
Zakir Hussain College, Delhi
- 43 **LEFT POLITICS**  
Manini Chatterjee, journalist and CPI(M) worker, Delhi
- 47 **FEDERAL ANARCHY**  
Kanchan Gupta, Director, S.P. Mukherjee Research  
Foundation, Delhi
- 50 **THE CAMERA HAS TWO FACES**  
Barkha Dutt, Correspondent, New Delhi Television, Delhi
- 52 **POLITICAL CONTINUITY**  
Jaipal Reddy, Minister for Information and Broadcasting,  
speaks to Ashok Singh, Chief of Bureau, TVI, Delhi
- 57 **WHAT AILS THE CONGRESS**  
V.N. Gadgil, spokesperson of the Congress party,  
speaks to Rajdeep Sardesai, Political Editor,  
New Delhi Television, Delhi
- 59 **BOOKS**  
Reviewed by Bharat Karnad, Shashi Joshi, Achin Vanaik,  
B.M. Kaushik and Harsh Sethi
- 67 **FURTHER READING**  
A select and relevant bibliography  
compiled by Sunita Gulati, IIPA, Delhi
- 73 **COMMENT**  
An extract from a report on the killings in Siwan, Bihar
- COVER**  
Designed by Madhu Chowdhury  
of Dilip Chowdhury Associates



# The problem

POLITICS as spectacle, a somewhat unedifying spectacle. Verily it is said, 'the more things change, the more they remain the same.' Does anyone really know what happened in the first three weeks of April? Yes, Deve Gowda had to go, and I.K. Gujral moved in. So what? We had a United Front government supported by the Congress (I) from the outside. And that is what we have now; the difference is that there is to be greater interaction with the Congress president. Was this what the Sitaram Kesri bombshell was all about?

Many explanations, or is it justifications, have been provided for the political drama that the country was recently subjected to. Ego clashes; insufficient consultation with the Congress (I) on issues of policy; weakening the forces of secularism; a selective use/misuse of the state machinery, particularly the CBI in opening up/pursuing cases, mainly to do with corruption against politicians. One can go on adding to the list of the supposed misdemeanours of the Gowda regime.

But, the great Parliamentary debate of 11 April, which had the entire nation glued to the TV sets for well over 12 hours, hardly provided a clue. It is not that the party spectrum present in the Parliament was objecting to the Budget. Or that those who had decided, under the compulsions of a three-line whip to vote the government out, talked of the failure to bring in the Bill on reservation for women, set up the institution of the Lok Pal, usher in electoral reforms *a la* the Goswami Committee recommendations. No one seriously complained about an increased incidence of communal/caste riots, or that the security and integrity of the nation had been seriously compromised by the foreign policy initiatives of the outgoing regime.

Yes, there was the usual sniping, particularly about the different constituents of the Front speaking in different voices, be it the Tata-Sta impasse or permission to be granted to foreign media companies on providing DTH services. More, in fact, was said about foot-dragging on corruption cases – be it Bofors, fodder or the Indian Bank. But overall the tone was that the Front had done better than expected

– not just with its Budget initiatives or in mending fences with our neighbours, but in giving greater representation in governance to regional forces and state governments.

What was equally evident was the fear, the apprehension of our elected representatives about the prospects of facing another election in less than a year after this Parliament had been constituted. And this across the spectrum. Evidently, this fear was not just about the timing (no one relishes the prospects of a national election in the summer), or the cost of the exercise, both to the state as also to parties and candidates; or where the money was to be raised, and that too in a short time. A greater fear was the absence of concrete issues with which candidates and parties could approach the electorate. Over-riding all these was the apprehension that fresh elections were unlikely to produce results dramatically different from those in 1996. So if no party or coalition was likely to come up with the requisite majority, why go to the hustings again?

And yet this crisis, if it can be so called, does bring to the fore serious issues about the nature of our evolving polity and modes of governance that we can ill-afford to neglect. These have both to do with the nature of our electoral system, the chronic inability of political parties to provide stable majorities, as also the emergence of new social forces and formations that are demanding their just place in our institutional dispensation.

For the last three decades the hegemony of the Congress has been under serious challenge. Many would argue that the era of one party dominance, be it the Congress or any other party, is over. The vacuum has been filled by a variety of formations – the BJP, the Janata Dal, regional parties and the communists – each claiming one or the other legacies of the earlier Congress. That, so far, has been the only party that could claim, with some justification, to mean something to everyone, a broad umbrella incorporating the national diversity. In short, the nation. Some go as far as to predict the demise of national parties, arguing that the different regional formations need to be accommodated not

just in their regions, but in central governance. How to rework the centre-state, nation-region dialectic in a framework of coalitional politics remains one of our greatest challenges.

Associated with this re-imagination of the nation, partly captured in the rubrics of federalism and decentralisation is another issue, one of the secular character of our polity. Overtly, everyone swears by secularism, pseudo or otherwise. But it does need to be admitted that the logic of the current ruling dispensation is the forging of a secular front. The fear, as expressed by the different parties who classify their 'other' as communal, is not just that if divided they fall, but that those who do not fit into the 'nation' as imagined by the 'non-seculars' will be permanently alienated if the ruling parties change. Central to this debate is Ayodhya.

There is a third rubric equally invoked in our political discourse, though it bears mention that the current crisis did not privilege this concern. And this is social justice – the accommodation of those lower down in the caste hierarchy, the erstwhile excluded, in the structures of power. Sometimes it takes the shape of the dalit-shoshit samaj; sometimes a coalition of backwards, dalits and Muslims. The concern remains – power needs to pass on from the control of the upper castes and classes. At the state level, the politics of such combinations has been entrenched. But what of the Centre?

All these reflect the emergence of new social forces and actors hitherto not just out of power but also unfamiliar with the workings of our different institutions. Their style, culture, modes of expression, attitudes towards rules and regulations, procedures and so on appear 'uncouth', if not 'criminal', to the ruling establishment. That at least are the descriptions provided by our media, shared widely, one must admit, in the middle classes. Often the decay of our institutions is attributed to this incursion of the 'unwashed' masses and their representatives. The 'great battles' over reservation and Mandalisation are symptomatic of this tendency.

This does not negate the real dangers posed by the criminalisation of politics. Be it mafia gangs, once subservient to politicians, now in politics themselves; or the increasingly blatant privatisation of public resources for personal and sectional gain – issues from corruption at every level, to law and order have become central in the understanding and definition of our evolving politics. Is all this just a middle-class fear of 'democracy', or is the erosion of the state, its laws and structures an issue that we have to confront and resolve, without falling prey to fascistic/authoritarian solutions? It is also clear that our institutions need radical overhaul if they are to appropriately respond to the new social forces.

Over-riding all these is the declining image of the politician. Judicial activism represents one facet of the shifting balance of power between the three wings of our governance – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. A greater fear is that politics itself as a meaningful activity is seen with dismay and disgust. The last few months have done little to elevate the sagging image of our political class. This danger is too serious to push under the carpet.

Our new prime minister has talked of the need for a healing touch, a new politics of consensus eschewing the 'untouchability' syndrome marking the different political parties. Be it within the Parliament or out in the streets, the language of political discourse approximates a battlefield, not quite designed to lower the temperature. If coalitions are the ruling form of the future, then both stylistically and institutionally, accommodation has to be foregrounded.

But will this new call for 'civilized' behaviour lead to a new consensus of the privileged, effectively shutting out the voices and concerns of the lower orders? How will they fare in an overall demand for stability? And do they have effective options other than confrontation, often brutal?

Each 'crisis' brings to the fore new formulations, hopefully new solutions. This issue of SEMINAR engages with some these concerns. The hope is that all of us will introspect and act, not withdraw in cynical resignation.

# Unholy alliances

CHANDAN MITRA

IF Sir Surendra Nath Banerjee were to write his magnum opus now, instead of a hundred years ago as he did, he might have been pardoned for titling it 'India: A nation in the unmaking'. In the 50th year of Independence, a surface view of India would indeed record considerable retrogression: There is widespread political instability; corruption has eaten into the vitals; a crisis of confidence has gripped society; the economy has forever been taxiing on the runway and take-off seems as unlikely as it did three decades ago; religion, region and caste determine the parameters of policy; democracy, far from establishing meritocratic government appears to have delivered a kakistocracy (government by the worst citizens) instead. Is India worth the tryst which it had with destiny 50 years ago? Is India an idea worth persisting with any more?

Perhaps the most pernicious facet of India's imperfect democracy is the emergence of a parasitic class of opinion-makers who stalk the capital, determining government and media response on issues of vital consequence. In many ways, they have successfully hijacked the

nation's agenda. Finally, with the chance elevation of one of their ilk to the once-august office of prime minister, they are now 'legitimately' ensconced in power. The members of these 'chattering' and 'non-voting' classes, with private contempt for and public espousal of the cause of the 'great unwashed masses', appear to have acquired a vested interest in preserving weak, minority governments at the Centre. That suits them, for such a scenario leads unsure regimes to solicit legitimacy certificates from this so-called intelligentsia. This is no mere polemic. It is a crucial ingredient in the despondency that has gripped those who have cherished the concept of India and the magnificent Indian experiment of the last half-century.

Thanks to the hegemony of the Delhi intelligentsia over the mindset of the political elite, we are witnessing a bizarre spectacle of political instability being celebrated rather than being a central issue of concern. The political class, reeling under the onslaught of judicial activism, media denunciation and public derogation, is seeking to underplay its role in charting a course out of the current stale

rate. A concerted attempt is underway to convince an exhausted nation that the age of coalition governments has come to stay; that such unstable coalitions alone can reflect the true spirit of India's federal diversity. That coalitions, by definition, are unnatural, expeditious arrangements, is completely overlooked by the proponents of this view. This line of argument, unfortunately, appears to have an increasing number of takers because the current fragmented psephological patterns have attained an aura of permanency in the public mind.

It is a reality that following the demise of the Congress as the real united front of social interest groups and the failure of the BJP to inherit the mantle, India has been condemned to be ruled by a bunch of rapacious politicians who have strung together an unprincipled alliance of motley regional parties, many of which are dependent on extortionist mafia gangs for survival. The recent disclosures of the magnitude of the Bihar animal husbandry (oddler) scam and the yet undisclosed embezzlements of the Ayurveda scam in Uttar Pradesh, are but symptomatic of the extent of the loot of the public exchequer by the so-called votaries of social justice. Equally, the licence-permit raj, which the Congress had erected in the name of socialist pattern of society, is what set the benchmark for official corruption. If Narasimha Rao is embroiled in a host of corruption cases today, it is probably because he failed to disguise the systematic theft of public funds behind an ideological veneer. The magic word 'socialism' had, for decades, served as a ritualistic *behti Ganga* in which Congress leaders from the time of K. Krishna Menon have sought to wash away their sins.

This preamble is necessary to appreciate why faith in India and India's polity to move towards a cohesive, democratic nation state appears to be fast fading. The issue is not merely of political instability; states have lived with frequent changes of government, large-scale horse-trading of legislators and so on, for decades. Nevertheless, there

has remained some faith in ideology, belief that political programmes matter, and conviction that promises publicly made have some sanctity. But when there comes about a government that did not even seek to be elected, it is understandable if the electorate turns hopelessly cynical. The present United Front government has about as much legitimacy as the Chandra Shekhar regime.

Previous non-Congress coalitions, led by Morarji Desai and V.P. Singh respectively, did not suffer from this basic debility because the parties they led had gone to the polls, unitedly pledging to replace the Congress. As long as the current United Front regime continues in power, there can be no hope that faith will be restored in the political system. It has to be understood that the United Front is a totally artificial, hybrid outfit with no ideology or commitment to any cause. Unfortunately and mistakenly, the Delhi intelligentsia has draped the Front with an unwarranted mystique of being the voice of the regions, the aspirations of the downtrodden and other such hyperbole. Bereft of virtually any representation from the vast northern and western states, it is truly baffling to be told that the United Front is a genuine repository of regional urges and qualifies as India's first successful experiment in a federalised polity.

**T**he current experiment with coalition politics is, therefore, doomed to long term failure, regardless of how many years of paralysed governance it provides at the Centre as a result of political exigencies. It cannot be a successful coalition because it fails to fulfil some basic criteria that determine the longevity and effectiveness of such political arrangements. In order to succeed, a coalition must fulfil all or most of the following basic conditions:

- 1) There should be a dominant party which determines its policies and programmes, making some relatively inconsequential concessions to sectional interests represented by junior partners of the arrangement.
- 2) There should be both a programmatic understanding and electoral adjustment prior to the polls among all coalition

partners. In other words, they should contest the elections jointly and try to obtain a mandate, instead of ganging up following the declaration of results with certain short-term objectives. If the latter happens, the arrangement cannot be durable.

3) All partners of any such programmatic and electoral arrangement must participate in government. The concept of 'support from outside' is what renders coalitions unstable, as evident from the Charan Singh, V.P. Singh, Chandra Shekhar and Deve Gowda experiments. The I.K. Gujral arrangement, too, is destined to collapse on this very count.

4) If erstwhile rivals come together to forge an electoral (or in a rare case, a post-electoral) alliance, they should publicly declare their 'historic compromise' as the Italian communist leader Enrico Berlinguer did when entering into an arrangement with the Christian Democrats. Lack of transparency is another factor which results in mistrust between coalition partners and brings down such governments.

5) In the Indian context, a successful coalition needs one more qualifying clause. Given that most political parties represent certain reasonably well-defined class/caste interests, it is important that a social coalition is forged at the grassroots which eventually translates into a political arrangement. West Bengal and Kerala exemplify this best. In fact, in Kerala, even the Congress has mirrored the Left Democratic Front in forging a parallel class/caste alliance with stable partnership arrangements which enables it to periodically oust the LDF. The collapse of the Samajwadi Party's alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, on the other hand, reveals what happens when alliance partners are socially incompatible.

**T**he social coalition concept requires further elaboration. When incompatible social groups come together with the sole intention of grabbing power for its own sake, contradictions at the grassroots results in the eventual fracturing of the arrangement. Take Uttar Pradesh for



example. In the post-zamindari abolition, post-green revolution scenario in U.P.'s rural society, sections of the erstwhile agricultural tenants and sharecroppers have emerged as the dominant class of small and medium owner-cultivators. While the large landholdings of the upper caste Rajputs, Muslims and (in some cases) brahmins, have been broken up, the beneficiaries are mainly their former tenants, described in British census reports as 'kisan castes', namely, Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris. Although many of them till the land themselves, the bulk of the labour on their possessions is provided by dalit, landless agrarian labourers. This, axiomatically, results in a conflict relationship. In fact, the conflict pre-dates zamindari abolition because Yadavs, in particular, always served not just as tenants but also *lathaits* (musclemen) of upper caste landlords in the past.

**T**his historic confrontation is too deep-rooted to be resolved by a mere electoral alliance between a Yadav dominated Samajwadi Party and an exclusively dalit formation, the Bahujan Samaj Party. The problem is further compounded by the traditional hostility between a section of the dalits (Valmiki to be precise) with the lower caste Muslims in U.P.'s urban slums. The Muslim alliance with the Yadavs, under the leadership of Mulayam Singh, could, therefore, only add to the inherent contradictions in the SP-BSP tie-up.

In the brief period that Mulayam Singh reigned at the head of this unstable coalition, atrocities on dalits increased significantly. Not all these were perpetrated by Yadavs, but the general perception was of Yadav triumphalism and muscle-flexing over their weaker partner. Sooner or later, this had to find reflection in the political process. Realising that it would not be possible to restrain his exuberant supporters in the countryside, Mulayam Singh attempted to wean away individual BSP legislators, break their party, and establish a government entirely on his own strength. The BSP was further upset by the rampant Yadavisation of the

administration at the district level which ensured that dalits were kept out of power where it mattered, despite holding important ministerial positions in Lucknow.

**T**his background is necessary to comprehend because there is widespread misconception among political analysts (including many senior political commentators and journalists) about the SP-BSP alliance. It is commonly believed that only Kanshi Ram's megalomania and Mayawati's rapacity led to the collapse of the 'natural alliance' between the socially and economically less privileged. Mulayam Singh may not tire of trying to recreate an electorally unbeatable Dalit-Yadav-Muslim (DYM) alliance, but grassroots realities are unlikely to allow such an arrangement to be reborn in the foreseeable future.

Therefore, despite the widespread scepticism about the longevity of the BJP-BSP coalition in the state, this alliance is founded on a more durable social base than the SP-BSP tie-up. It is not that there are no contradictions between the upper castes (who form a substantial section of the BJP's support) and the dalits. However, the conflict is more in the cultural sphere and less in the economic. Also, the attempt to woo the BSP in the name of secularism does not go very far, because in the Indian countryside communalism is yet to become a political phenomenon. There remains a socio-cultural divide between the Hindus and the Muslims, a divide that is sharper than within the Hindus along caste lines. But unlike in urban areas, this social divide has not influenced politics, which explains why the BJP resorts to caste politics in U.P. with such consummate skill. The appeal of Hindutva, the BJP has learnt, can go thus far and no further, because in rural India Islam is not viewed as 'the other' and the Muslim cannot be positioned as 'the enemy within'.

Consequently, the BSP's response to the appeal for secular unity has always been lukewarm. It went along with Mulayam Singh for purely tactical reasons and its expectations have been more than fulfilled. For many years to come, the Bahujan Samaj Party will remain a for-

midable political force in U.P. because of the dalit consolidation it has effected. This is not to suggest that the BJP and BSP are natural allies where the SP and BSP are not. However, there is the question of the principal contradiction which the BSP has realised. This is the contradiction which had led the Congress (unofficially) coin the slogan, *brahm harijan bhai-bhai, Ye pichhdi jati kah se aayee?* (brahmins, harijans are brothers, where-from have these backward classes emerged?) in Bihar in the mid-1980s.

**I**n a way, the BJP-BSP alliance represents a social coalition which the Congress encapsulated within itself all the decades. There was a third component to the Congress's social alliance—the Muslims. But the Congress has been irretrievably debilitated in the wake of *shilany* Bhagalpur and Babri Masjid which caused the Muslim breakaway. Following the Muslims' departure from Congress fold, the party's upper caste supporters also deserted it because the party was no longer seen to be in a winning position. A new social coalition, a modified version of its erstwhile *awami* is consequently in the making in Uttar Pradesh. This has not happened so far in neighbouring Bihar, but the Kurmi-Koeri breakaway from the Janata Dal and upper castes' desertion of the Congress holds a similar potential. The dalits in Bihar are economically too underprivileged to acquire their own voice yet; therefore, seem to prefer a powerful Yadav umbrella. But as soon as they consolidated into a class for themselves, they too are likely to follow the same example.

The purpose of elaborating the phenomenon is to underscore the essential basis of successful coalition formations in India. Without a social alliance at the grassroots, durable coalitions are bound to remain a pipe-dream, no matter how frequently they may be put together in Delhi, cemented by the exigencies of hung Parliament and powerlust. Similarly, regionalism cannot be the basis of a stable coalition because there is a

to how long conflicting state interests can be pushed under the carpet. The Alapati and Cauvery disputes may have been flung onto the backburner, but they cannot be resolved in the absence of any group or individual who towers over petty regional interests to take a dispassionate view of such complex matters.

Indira Gandhi could get away by pronouncing the most unrealistic verdicts on such disputes because none within (or even outside) her party was in a position to challenge her authority or accuse her of bias. But a Karnataka-obsessed Deve Gowda or a Gujral who seeks legitimacy only from the ivory towers of intellectual watering holes in Delhi, cannot acquire the stature to resolve these disputes. This is not just a reflection on the inadequacies of their personality or political acumen. The more serious problem arises from the fact that they are leaders of a ramshackle alliance of conflicting state parties whose *raison d'être* is to maximise their state's interests. They cannot, therefore, be acceptable as arbiters. This, in turn, ensures brittleness in the current coalition arrangement. Even if the United Front outlasts the Janata Party or Janata Dal regimes in terms of calendar months spent in office, it will not be regarded by future historians as an example of a durable coalition.

In sum, therefore, it must be reiterated that coalitions based on the principle of *primus inter pares* (first among equals) are an unsustainable proposition, in Delhi or elsewhere. The two fundamental factors that ensure a coalition's durability are (a) domination by a large party which, broadly, determines the agenda, and (b) a social coalition at the grassroots which eventually finds reflection in a political arrangement. Till these factors are present, no coalition in India can aspire to longevity. Sadly, neither scenario appears plausible in the foreseeable future. To that extent, India may be condemned to be governed by *kaamchalu* (holding operation) governments, appropriately described as regimes on daily wages. India has no option but to mark time till a single party government or a coalition dominated by a big party gains acceptability with the electorate.

## In search of political stability

BHASKAR DUTTA

THE sudden fall of the Deve Gowda ministry has resulted in a renewed interest in issues relating to coalition politics. The reasonably smooth transfer of power to another government is encouraging though the chances of the current government surviving a full term are pretty bleak. The absence of a dominant party, coupled with the growing power of the different state parties, suggests that we are doomed to a succession of coalition governments. Unfortunately, the Indian experience with coalition governments has not been a particularly happy one.

Coalition governments took over in several states after the elections in 1967, which changed the pattern of representation in our legislatures, bringing in a tendency towards multipartyism or fragmentation of legislatures. Multipartyism resulted in the formation of highly unstable coalition governments, as many as 10 governments being formed in the four states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Punjab during the period between the elections in 1967 and July 1968. At the centre, the first proper coalition government was formed in 1989

(though some pundits also label the Janata government of 1977-79 as a coalition government since the Janata party was essentially a loose collection of dissimilar parties), but it collapsed rather quickly. Its successor was the government led by Chandra Shekhar, which lasted for only 4 months.

**G**overnment instability results in various kinds of economic distortions. Unstable coalitions or even single-party governments that are not likely to remain in power for an extended period of time are liable to introduce policy distortions for at least two reasons. First, such governments obviously have very short time-horizons. This has important implications for economic policy in general and budgetary policy in particular. If political power alternates rapidly and randomly between competing political parties or groups of parties, then each government will follow myopic policies since it assigns a low probability to being re-elected. Conversely, hard policy options whose benefits are perceived to flow after a long gestation lag are unlikely to be adopted by such a government. One example which immediately comes to mind is the failure of the United Front ministry to raise the price of petroleum products, despite the rapid increase in the deficit on the oil pool account.

The second route through which the rapid turnover of governments may induce policy distortions is specially relevant in the case of coalition governments. The shorter the expected duration of such a government, the more difficult it is for the members of the ruling coalition to agree on policies. This difficulty is accentuated if the parties in the ruling coalition are heterogeneous. Each party in the ruling coalition is most likely to promote populist policies to further its own narrow interests. For instance, it may spend indiscriminately in order to satisfy the short-term needs of its support groups. This will result in a legacy of high debt to its successor. Although this may constrain the actions of the next government, the current government does not

care about the priorities of the next government.

The most likely casualty of all this will be fiscal discipline since government expenditure will be excessive. There is empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that coalition governments are guilty of fiscal indiscipline. Roubini and Sachs (1989) analysed the pattern of fiscal deficits in OECD countries, and found a clear tendency for larger deficits in countries characterised by short average tenure of government and by the presence of many political parties in a ruling coalition. An analysis of patterns of fiscal policies followed by various state governments in India between 1967-68 and 1992-93 also indicates that unstable coalition governments do have significantly higher levels of revenue expenditure than other types of governments.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the analysis reveals that unstable coalition governments are also unenthusiastic about raising non-tax revenues.

**G**iven this disturbing scenario, recent public debate has focused on possible institutional reforms in order to facilitate stable governance. One that has been discussed is the practice currently followed in Germany, which was adopted in response to the instability of governments during the Weimar republic. Historically, majorities of the right and the left combined forces to bring down governments composed of centrist parties, but could not themselves formulate a common platform given their vast philosophical differences. In an attempt to overcome this impasse, the new German constitution adopted in 1949 prescribed that votes of no-confidence must be 'constructive'. This meant that a Chancellor could only be dismissed by parliament if a new Chancellor was elected simultaneously. The system of constructive no confidence increased the durability of subsequent German governments since the existing government could no longer be brought down by a combination of disparate forces who were not themselves interested in forming a government. Of course,

1. See Dutta (1996a).

another advantage of the system is that it ruled out the necessity of any mid-term polls by providing an in-built mechanism for the smooth transition of power. In 1971, Spain incorporated a similar policy of a constructive vote of no confidence in its new democratic constitution.

**T**he practice of a constructive vote of no confidence may improve the duration of coalition governments when a few major parties with well-defined ideologies capture almost all the seats in the legislature. Indeed, this is the pattern of representation in the German parliament. It essentially implies that the number of possible combinations of parties which can constitute a majority is limited. For instance, if parties A, B and C capture 35, 30 and 25 seats respectively in a house of 100 seats, then any two of these three parties must be in a majority government. Also, there can essentially be only three possible governments. Moreover, if parties A, and C are clearly identified as rightists and leftists, and hence very unlikely to join forces, then there can only be two possible coalition governments AB and BC. If AB is in power, then the government may be brought down through a positive no confidence motion moved by BC. This makes it unlikely though not impossible,<sup>2</sup> that a subsequent no confidence motion will be instituted by AB. This kind of political logic may explain why the average duration of governments in Germany was as high as 4 months during the period 1945-1980.

It is debatable whether the German practice is a solution for India at this juncture. The system of positive no confidence motions does not really address the problem of fragmented legislature and the presence of several small parties is the root cause of government instability. The more fragmented the legislature the larger the number of possible winning or majority coalitions. Worse, if political morality is low, then no coalitions are ruled out – the extreme right could join

2. This certainly happens in India. The BJP and the BSP have now joined in holy matrimony once again although their previous marriage ended amidst bitterness.

forces with the left to share the spoils of power. Even the necessity of a positive no confidence motion cannot deter various groups from bringing down the current government. Hence, it is not surprising that the world over, there is a noticeable inverse relationship between the effective number of parties<sup>3</sup> in the legislature and the average duration of coalition governments.

**A**nother possible area of institutional reform is in the sphere of the electoral system. We have inherited the Westminster or majoritarian model of democracy which means government by the majority of the people. It argues that majorities should govern and minorities should oppose. Executive power in the Westminster model may be vested in a single party which may enjoy the support of less than 50 per cent of the voters.<sup>4</sup> An alternative to the majoritarian system is the consensus model of democracy which advocates that *all* important parties share executive power. The typical electoral system of majoritarian democracy is the single member district plurality or first-past-the-post system. The plurality system is a good reflection of the majoritarian philosophy since the candidate supported by the largest number of voters wins, while all other voters go unrepresented. On the other hand, consensus democracy relies on the family of Proportional Representation (PR) systems, which allows both majorities and minorities to gain representation by translating votes into seats in a proportional manner.

Conventional wisdom amongst political scientists is that plurality rule or the first-past-the post system is most likely to produce majority parties. In fact, Duverger's Law states that single-member district electoral systems in

which winners are decided by simple plurality rule usually produce two-party systems.<sup>5</sup> However, plurality rule is characterised by a high degree of disproportionality between vote shares and seat shares, the number of seats won by bigger parties being unduly large compared to their vote shares. The use of the plurality rule encourages tyranny of the majority over the minority and may well lead an extreme form of violation of minority rights. If a particular group happens to be a minority in every constituency, it may be denied any representation at all even though the group may command a sizeable following when its support is aggregated across constituencies.

**I**n contrast, the family of PR systems is more favourable to minority groups and small parties since the number of seats won by a party may closely reflect its share of the overall votes. Of course, members within the class of PR systems differ in the degree of proportionality, with the specific PR formula influencing the degree of proportionality. Another aspect of PR systems which is also relevant in this context is the district magnitude, which is the average number of legislators elected per district. The smaller the district magnitude, the greater is the bias in favour of larger parties. Indeed, PR systems coincide with the plurality rule when all districts have only a single member. Hence, the goal of fair representation would seem to suggest the use of PR systems with relatively large district magnitudes.

Unfortunately, this attractive feature of the PR family also contributes to its main drawback. Since PR systems are more favourable to small parties, they tend to promote more fragmented legislatures. An implication of this is that countries which use PR systems typically are run by coalition governments. This is corroborated by data on national elections of industrialised countries which have had a long history of elections. Blais and Carty (1987) use this data to study the impact of electoral formulae on the creation of

5. Duverger (1951) made this assertion on the basis of an observed empirical regularity.

majority governments. They report that the probability of a one-party majority system is close to zero in PR systems, and increases by 40 per cent in simple plurality systems. However, the relationship between different electoral systems and the extent to which the legislature is fragmented is not always straightforward. In particular, it depends on the distribution of electoral support of the various parties.

**T**his phenomenon is illustrated below by means of a hypothetical example. In the example, I compare the distribution of seats won by different parties under the plurality rule and a particular member of the PR family. The specific PR rule I am using here is the 'largest remainders' formula using the *Droop quota*. As in all quota systems, the first step is to calculate a quota of votes that entitles parties to a seat. A party gets as many seats as it has quotas of votes. Any seats which remain after all full quotas are exhausted are given to those parties having the largest numbers of unused votes. The Droop quota divides the total number of valid votes by the number of seats plus one.

Consider a 10-member legislature with distribution of vote shares as given below. In the table below, party A is a 'big' party getting a sizeable number of votes in each constituency. There are also 10 small 'localised' parties (or Independent candidates) *each* party *j* (for *j*=1,2,...,10) getting votes only in constituency *j*. The total number of valid votes in each constituency is 100.

Then, under plurality rule, party A is denied any seats at all since party *j* wins the seat from constituency *j*. What if the PR system with the Droop quota is employed? In this example, the Droop

Constituency	A's vote share	j's vote share
1	48	52
2	48	52
3	48	52
4	48	52
5	48	52
6	49	51
7	49	51
8	49	51
9	49	51
10	49	51

The effective number of parties is an index of the number of parties in the legislature, taking into account the relative size of the parties. It is given the reciprocal of the sum of the squares of the proportions of seats held by each party. The more fragmented the legislature, the larger will be the effective number of parties.

Unless there are only two major parties, it is very unusual for the party winning a majority of seats to capture a majority of the votes.

quota is 91. So, party A gets 5 seats, while parties 1 to 5 get 1 seat each.

While this example is contrived, the distribution of votes does have some similarity to the actual electoral situation in India. Consider, for example, the large number of Independent candidates who get elected. A sizeable number of seats are also captured by small parties, each with very localised support. On the other hand, the bigger national parties such as the Congress or the BJP have some support in each constituency, although they may not get enough votes to score over the smaller parties and Independent candidates in several constituencies. Under these circumstances, there is no a priori reason to rule out the possibility that these bigger parties may do better under a PR system. Of course, if the bigger parties actually do better under the PR system, then it also raises the possibility that the legislature may be less fragmented under such a system.

**A** drastic change from the present system would be the introduction of some form of Proportional Representation (PR) system. Of course, as I have mentioned earlier, the pure form of the PR system may increase the number of parties gaining representation. However, the PR system can be modified by specifying that only those parties getting at least (say) 5 per cent of the total votes cast can secure representation. This stipulation is incorporated in several countries including Germany. The immediate consequence of such a clause in India would be the elimination of all Independent candidates and splinter groups. The typical pattern of representation would be the election of a small number of parties, each getting several seats. This would greatly facilitate both coalition formation as well as the formulation of coherent policies. In addition, the stipulation about the minimum cut-off mark could promote the merger or consolidation of political parties, which would also add to the overall stability of the system.

Simulation exercises were carried out in Dutta (1996b) to compare the actual pattern of representation in state

legislatures with the hypothetical pattern which would result if the plurality rule had been replaced by a member of the PR system based on the *Droop quota*, and if the pattern of voting had remained unchanged. Of course, any change in the electoral system would have resulted in different responses from both parties as well as voters. So, the hypothetical representation produced by the PR system is an *approximation* to the pattern of representation which would have resulted if Indian states had actually used this system. Nevertheless, some regularities revealed by the simulation exercise are quite interesting. The principal conclusion which emerges is that the proportional rule does not necessarily lead to a greater degree of instability or fractionalization. The crucial variable is the distribution of electoral support for the various parties. In cases where plurality rule has produced a majority party, the introduction of proportional rule may lead to greater fragmentation. In particular, proportional rule may result in the absence of majority parties. However, in situations where the plurality rule itself results in the presence of a relatively large number of small parties and Independent candidates, proportional rule may lead to a more stable system.

**I**n other words, in situations where the plurality rule itself is unable to produce a single party majority government, the modified PR may result in a less fragmented legislature. This holds out some hope since the days of a single party winning a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha seem to be over. Certainly, the modified PR system merits serious consideration by economists, political scientists, and perhaps even by politicians.

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# A defining moment

MALINI PARTHASARATHY

IT is ironic but in some ways perhaps appropriate that India is facing, more sharply than ever before, strong challenges to its capacity as a nation state and its national identity in the 50th year of its independence from colonial rule. There is certainly cause for disquiet in the manner in which recent political events have played out and which have evoked strong feelings of cynicism and disgust from ordinary people who have become particularly estranged from the unceasing display of extraordinary selfishness from the political class as a whole. The reaction of public opinion all over the country to the sudden withdrawal of support to the Deve Gowda administration by the Congress(I) President, Sitaram Kesri, was surprisingly uniform in its expression of distaste for the brazen and short-sighted move against a government that was perceived as beginning to perform creditably.

But there was also an indication that the rising political consciousness of the newly articulate middle classes was expressing itself in a distaste for the politicking of the political elite and in an awareness that the ordinary citizen's entitlement to good governance was being compromised by the power games of the ruling elite. Nevertheless, there was

an upbeat side to this sordid chapter of power-hungry politicians going to any length to pull down a government. The entire episode in which the United Front managed to contain the damage caused by Kesri's precipitate action by ensuring that the basic unity of the secular coalition remained intact, even as it managed to overcome the tensions with the Congress(I), had the beneficial impact of underscoring some key assumptions about the governance of India's multicultural and pluralist society.

To begin with was the fact that the UF survived the Congress party's machinations and in fact appeared relatively unscathed by Deve Gowda's forced exit. This denouement was unlike the unhappy experience of earlier non-Congress coalitions, such as those headed by Charan Singh, V.P Singh and Chandra Shekhar, which came to untimely ends because a petulant Congress(I) decided to withdraw its favours. This time, the myth of the indispensability of the Congress party to the Indian political system was quietly punctured, as its leadership was ultimately forced to retrace its adventurist steps in order to save the UF as a governing dispensation. Looking back, a month after all the self-created political turmoil, it does seem that the Kesri tantrums had the

unintended effect of helping to reinforce the collective stakes in the survival of a secular and federal governing dispensation.

The critical point was that while the Congress party was forced to surrender its grand dreams of a coup, it could not be seen as opportunistically throwing the field wide open for the communal forces to take over. This meant that Kesri and his colleagues had to withdraw their claim to form a government and settle for the UF's continuation with a new leader. It was not just election phobia that narrowed the Congress(I)'s options. It is evident that in the post-Ayodhya period, the Congress has begun to feel the pressure of a critical public perception that its secular credentials are only wafer-thin. Hence, it is forced to respond in a manner that would unambiguously distinguish it from the BJP and the Hindutva forces.

**A**nother trend, that of an increasing assertiveness of regional leaders on the national stage, appears to have been reinforced at a symbolic level as a result of the Kesri episode. The role of the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu as the key intermediary in the protracted and painful process of leadership selection within the Front, served to demonstrate a new dimension of the ascendancy of regional parties in the Indian political arena. Regional leaders were now seen as eager and willing to participate in decision-making at the national level.

At another level, it did seem that regional parties were moving assertively into the political space vacated by the Congress(I) and yet unconquered by the BJP. The high profile activity of Naidu and other regional players in ensuring the UF's continuance brought to life the idea of cooperative federalism in the public imagination. It did seem that the concept of a federal political framework was becoming a credible reality. Such a concept could acquire meaning and substance only under a non-Congress administration in Delhi, given that the Congress(I)'s own centralised and monolithic structure of leadership rendered it inherently inhospitable to any creativity in this regard.

It would be tempting to ascribe the re-emphasising of a political commitment to federalism and secularism to the triumph of democratic values. But that is not quite the whole story. The election phobia and more important, the apprehensions of the business community that the political uncertainty would derail the economic reform process and the marketisation of Indian society, were major factors that constrained any tendency to adventurism on the part of political parties. The Congress(I) was forced to back-off because it was aware of the adverse reaction of the middle classes to this operation to destabilise the Front administration.

There has been a quiet if profound transformation of the political context since the eighties. One obvious reason is the liberalisation process which has set in motion ripples of change in every sphere, particularly impacting on the political consciousness of the middle classes. The accent on individualism and entitlements has made middle class citizens more aware of a range of democratic rights. Hence the intense middle class anger against the corruption of politicians which manifests in unconcealed glee that other institutions such as the judiciary are taking on the political system, much to the despair of Delhi's political elite.

**T**he point is that in post-reforms India, the hard sell mounted on behalf of the reforms by industry and government, conveyed through the print and electronic media for a change of ethos that could make India more attractive as an investment destination, has had the impact of distancing the middle classes from the political system and rendering them more cynical about the promises and claims of various political leaders. It is evident that a different sort of national psyche is now emerging, which is bound to generate new pressure on political parties and leaders to respond more seriously to public perception.

A surprising indicator of a change in the public mood in the country was an overwhelming solidarity of public or

rather middle class sentiment for the UF's survival rather than in favour of a Congress coup. This unusual display of loyalty to a non-Congress formation, particularly in the South, was because the UF was seen as committed a votary of the reform process as the Congress(I). Hence the tremendous pressure wrought by the representatives of industry, such as the CII or FICCI, to ensure that the 'Chidambaram budget' be adopted, come what may.

**I**t is clear that the far reaching socio-economic changes and the consequent impact on middle class expectations of the role of the state, have irrevocably altered the political context. This development is bound to dispirit Congress and BJP strategists who are likely to find their formulas for mass mobilisation losing effectiveness in the new environment. The change in the pattern of governance brought about by the emergence of the United Front, which has introduced a more institutionalised structure for the dispersion of political authority, has also had a substantive impact on the public perception of the role of the state.

There is no question that despite the poor public opinion about the individual leaders who head the Front constituent parties, there is a widespread recognition that the experiment which has a steering committee at its spearhead and which bases itself for the most part on a common minimum programme, reflects a broad and credible political consensus. The retreat of individualised leadership, even as the policy direction and parameters are firmly within the reins of the Front steering committee, has vested the decisions of government with far more moral authority and unassailability.

Of course, the seamy underside of this experiment is the heterogeneous and uneven calibre of leadership, the fact that the government is subjected to tremendous and unsavoury pressure from various erring constituents not to take action against their various transgressions. But I would argue that the fact of the UF's untidiness or its cacophony or even its sometimes incoherent policy twists and turns could ultimately be seen as a small

price to pay for the greater gains from the experiment.

What are these gains? The most important is that the relentless advance of the Hindu chauvinist forces which had gathered ominous momentum during the era of Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao has been relatively stemmed as a result of a more principled and unambiguous approach to the defence of secularism on the part of the state. One of the darkest chapters in Indian history – the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindutva fanatics – had come about as a result of the sometimes tacit and sometimes brazen legitimisation of the Sangh Parivar's tactics of communal mobilisation by the two preceding Congress administrations.

**I**t is noteworthy that the sharpest attack on secularism as a governing doctrine for the Indian republic was mounted during Narasimha Rao's tenure, even as the BJP and its allies carried on a relentless assault on the core principles that have held this nation together. It has been pointed out by various writers that the BJP's share of the national vote has remained static, despite its frenetic political activity – at around 20 per cent in 1996 as in 1991. But this does not take into account the destructive impact of the Hindutva campaign on the political context. Its pernicious and exclusionary doctrines represent a grave threat to the underlying logic of the effort to preserve national unity which is already under considerable pressure from various ethnic, linguistic and caste affiliations.

In 1995 and in early 1996, the Indian polity was under grave threat of being subsumed by an angry tide of communal polarisation in the wake of the vituperative campaign by the Sangh Parivar. That such a situation does not appear as ominously imminent today is an achievement arising out of the consolidation of the secular political forces under the UF administration. Given that the *raison d'être* of the UF's formation was spelt out categorically in the Front's common minimum programme, gave the first important signal of a political approach that shed the ambivalence of recent years

on this vital and axiomatic principle of keeping the state equidistant from all communal groups. The common minimum programme set out the UF's commitment to 'represent the resolve of the Indian people to preserve the secular nature of their heritage.' The document also emphasised that the parties constituting the Front interpreted the election verdict as 'a mandate for the formation of a secular, liberal and democratic coalition government at the Centre' and said further that 'it is only such a government that can reflect the pluralistic nature of our society.'

One could dismiss these words as empty rhetoric had there been any subsequent ambivalence discernible in the approach of the Deve Gowda administration or even under Gujral. But unlike in the cases of the Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao regimes, it is clear that the Hindutva brigade's continuing attempts at communal mobilisation reflecting in the campaigns on Mathura and Varanasi have not demonstrated the mobilisationary potential that they did earlier. It is evident that the more unambiguously secular the attitude of the governing dispensation, the more difficult it is for the communal forces to raise their banners.

**G**iven that the UF has such a heterogeneous base and is especially vulnerable to self-destruction because of the maverick and corrupt individuals who are among its top leaders and who are probably willing to bring the entire edifice tumbling down along with their own fortunes, it is vital that the UF administration under Gujral ensure that its functioning is firmly based within a context of clearly defined political values. Apart from the commitment to a secular orientation, the UF cannot afford to devalue the other commitments implicit in its own conceptualisation, such as revitalising the federal framework of governance. It is critical that the UF takes a fresh look at the entire framework of centre-state relations, in order to provide a more up-to-date allocation of powers and responsibilities between the centre and the states compat-

ible with the new economic and political ground realities.

It stands to reason that if the Centre is perceived as being far more creative and open-minded on the whole gamut of centre-state relations, it would be easier for a government in Delhi to begin negotiations on relatively tricky issues such as the alienation of Kashmir and the North East. The UF would have to accept that the only way it can entrench itself as a serious and non-transient player in the political context is by unambiguously resetting the parameters of current political discourse in a manner that can be said to have strengthened the institutional framework of the republic. This would be an enduring contribution that subsequent governments can overlook only at their own peril.

**I**f the UF had some unexpected credibility accruing to it in the public eye, despite its soft core and uneven quality of its leadership, it is only because its heterogeneous base has lent itself to a greater institutionalisation of decision-making processes than was earlier permitted by the highly centralised and personalised leadership of the previous regimes. The restoration of political power to the designated institutional structures which reflects today in a growing assertiveness of the various agencies, including the CBI, in the executive branch, the higher profile of judicial activism and a wider process of political consultation between the centre and states, are all healthy tendencies.

In the long term, if these trends are allowed to entrench themselves, the relationship between civil society and state will in fact become more durable, giving India's democracy stronger roots than ever before. But the most critical component of India's governing vision, which must be upheld over all else, is the idea that India's pluralist society requires the political umbrella of a federal and secular democracy. Only under such an umbrella can the various ethnic, religious, caste and linguistic groups who constitute India's people have the political space to fulfill their aspirations and yet remain committed to the idea of the Indian republic.

# Why we must retain the majority-minority framework

RAJEEV BHARGAVA

THE ostensible reason for the formation of the United Front is to keep the BJP out of power at the centre. Party ideologues in the ruling coalition frequently claim that the unity of the front is cemented by a common commitment to the secular state and to protecting the interests of minorities. In other words, theirs is a secular front, marked by a principled opposition to the BJP, which is commonly seen as jeopardising the autonomous status of minority groups by its persistent demands that they join the mainstream as defined by it.

At the same time, the common perception of politics as dirty and unprincipled is so strong, and therefore scepticism about the motivations of politicians goes so deep, that it is hard to believe that the United Front is driven by a value-based consensus. Indeed, my own stance would have been fiercely distrustful were it not for my conviction that moral principles do not always hover above us, disembodied and unconnected with self-interest. They inhabit the same social space, often indistinguishably intertwined with both mundane desires and disagreeable opinions. Driven by power and money, faltering, stumbling, this ragbag coalition has taken, to some extent a principled stand in favour of what it sees as the common good of our society and polity. Its secularism is insecure, contaminated and only skin deep, but not altogether fraudulent.

It might, however, be asked: what does secularism have to do with minority (group specific) rights? Why cannot the

common good of the whole country, including the good of minorities, be served without the majority-minority framework? Aren't religiously defined majority and minorities intrinsically communal? Has not the very retention of this framework caused the Hindutva backlash? Isn't there some truth in the charge of minorityism and isn't minorityism a direct consequence of sticking to the majority-minority framework? Why can't we have a secular front without this 'communal' framework? In this brief paper, I do not wish to examine the contestable empirical claim concerning the causal link between this framework and the rise of communalism. I explore instead the normative claim that we are better off without it and therefore must jettison it.

In this extremely schematic and theoretical paper, I examine the meaning of this claim and offer seven ways of interpreting it. I then distinguish the distinctly desirable interpretations from those that are not. It is a truism that not everything desirable is politically possible, just as everything politically possible is not desirable. It is natural then to

1. This demand to discard the minority-majority framework is voiced not only by politicians and citizens but also by intellectuals. I have in mind the philosopher, J.N. Mohanty. See his, 'Secularism and Enlightenment in Indian Context', *India International Centre Quarterly*, Spring 1995, p. 21. Something like this is echoed by Joseph Ra 'Multiculturalism requires a political society to recognize the equal standing of all stable and viable communities existing in that society... there is room for talk of a minority problem or a majority tolerating a minority', *Ethics in the Public Domain* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 159.

ask whether in the present Indian context it is desirable, even if possible, to abandon the minority-majority framework. My hunch, given a commitment to a set of political and moral values, is that it is not. I conclude the paper by saying why not. The political implication of course is that a united secular front must be strongly committed to the majority-minority framework.

**L**et me begin by asking: what is minority (or majority)? Broadly, two alternative ways exist of understanding the notion. One from within the problematic of nationalism and the other from the vantage point of a certain conception of democracy. The democratic notion of minority rests on the rule of preference aggregation. Every preference, no matter what its content or who its holder, must be taken into account and placed on the same scale. Social status and economic position attached to preferences, the intensity of their expression, judgments as to their worth, what impact they have and on whom, are equally irrelevant. A majority and a minority emerges when such preferences are aggregated and counted.

Notions of majority and minority within this framework are predicated on preference.<sup>2</sup> Note that the idea of preference not only appears to but does depend on the notion of a self defined independently of fundamental commitments, constitutive attachments and communities. All it requires is that the self be treated as if upon entering a common public space, it can leave behind commitments and attachments. This implies that the only feature relevant in public contexts is the capacity of the self to choose among desires it happens to have. In this conception, therefore, the idea of a permanent majority or minority makes little sense.

Two problems are endemic to this model. First, preferences may shift too

By preference I mean a desire that we have cause we have chosen it. Preferences may be short term or long term. For the purposes of this paper, long term preference is an aggregation of short term preferences. A long term preference for something is a chain of short term preferences for the same thing.

swiftly, or sharply and create extreme instability. Second, the outcome of the procedure may repeatedly favour one kind of preference expressed by a set of individuals, which contrary to the intent of the model creates permanent majorities and minorities. Constitutional safeguards are therefore necessitated by the need to check the injustice of such outcomes, to prevent pitfalls of intolerable fluctuation or stability. Constitutional democracies prevent sharp swings in the content of every conceivable preference, and by protecting some key features of the system, stabilize the polity. They exclude some preferences from the arena of routine decision making on the ground that were they to congeal, they would adversely affect the position or value of other preferences. (For example, if majority preferences persistently point to a general ban on meat eating and a minority equally persistently expresses preference in favour of eating meat, then under constitutional democracies such preferences are excluded from decision making.) On the whole, all constitutions prevent democracies from sliding into anarchy or despotism and control the tyrannical elements of majoritarianism.

**T**he move from an aggregative to a constitutional model of democracy involves granting individuals some guarantees or privileges. This diminishes insecurity among individuals who reason thus: suppose that it turns out that a set of given preferences held persistently by a small number of people is always opposed to or incompatible with those of a larger number of people. Suppose also that it cannot be predicted in advance whether particular individuals will fall within a minority or a majority. Given, further that in a democratic system governed entirely by preferences, policy making is unlikely to be shaped by minority preferences, it is reasonable and in the interest of everyone to inhibit this untrammelled majoritarianism by assuring each other that policies exclusively meant for the minority will be governed by the internal preferences of its members and not by

external ones.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the necessity of rights.

To understand the second conception of majority-minority, imagine a set of individuals who not only see themselves but others too in terms of ascriptive features. Such individuals also see themselves as constituting a group around this feature. Assume two such groups with differing numerical strengths. On the basis of such ascriptive features, a majority and a minority exists. Here majority and minority are defined not in terms of preference, i.e., the desires people choose to have but rather by the permanent attributes that they happen to possess. These attributes are widely believed to constitute the very identity of individuals.<sup>4</sup> In a large society where people do not share the same ascriptive features, majorities and minorities exist more or less on a permanent basis. (For example, Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Quebecois in Canada, the many linguistic groups within India, Muslims in Britain.) Here we can legitimately speak of permanent majorities or minorities.

**S**ince when have majorities and minorities existed? At least since the formation of states. For example, numerically small religious groups existed in Empire states, such as the Jews in the Holy Roman Empire. However, enumeration, though necessary is not sufficient for the constitution of minority and majority. Three other features enter into its current understanding. First, groups must view themselves as a minority or a majority. Self-identification or the persistent identification by others in these terms, simultaneously or subsequently recognized by the group in question, is central to majority-minority formations. Second, the group must believe that its own identity-

3. External preferences are preferences held by people on what others may desire to do. This is roughly the same as the distinction between personal and external preference drawn by Ronald Dworkin. See his, *Taking Rights Seriously*, Duckworth, London, 1977, pp. 234.

4. It may be noted that majority and minority cannot be defined independently of each other and presuppose in turn a common framework, some commitment, however tenuous, of living together.



constituting features have the power to shape the structure of some social and political order, usually the one they happen to live in. In large democracies, this is likely to happen through representative institutions. Finally, it is only when this belief is accompanied or followed by the inability to exercise power, that the resulting sense of impotence breeds a perception of disadvantage. Indeed, a majority-minority syndrome has set in when this sense of disadvantage slides into an enduring feeling of insecurity.

The syndrome need not always be justified. A group may wish to shape the structure exclusively but not be allowed or try participating with others in determining it but not be permitted to do so. In the first case, there is no effective discrimination against the group. But a minority-majority syndrome is well grounded when the majority really discriminates against minorities. In such instances, minorities do not merely see themselves in terms of constitutive features that differentiate them from a larger group but are seen by others to be so, and this difference forms the basis of persistent disfavour.<sup>5</sup>

I began with the minority-majority framework and later referred to the minority-majority syndrome. The two terms are not interchangeable. Syndrome suggests something stronger and pejorative. When a deep malaise sets into the framework causing, for one or another intrinsic reason, a spiraling estrangement between the minority and the majority, then we are saddled with a minority-majority syndrome. A minority-majority framework on the other hand rests on different self-identifications and some distance between the two groups, but implies no snowballing alienation or the chronic malaise typical of syndromes. True, a society deploying the majority-minority framework is not the best of all possible

worlds, but in my use of the term it is not at all obvious that it connotes a terrible, avoidable state of affairs.

**W**e may now interpret Mohanty's claim that the majority-minority framework must be abandoned. I suggest the following interpretations.

First, our analytical inability to distinguish framework from syndrome may have led us to demand the abandonment of the majority-minority framework when in fact we wish to eliminate merely the majority-minority syndrome. This demand that we rid ourselves of the majority-minority syndrome takes the following three forms – Abandon the syndrome by:

- a) The direct elimination, wherever it exists, of discrimination of minorities.
- b) Jettisoning the widespread perception of disadvantage among minorities.
- c) Transiting from a simple majoritarian to constitutional democracy, i.e. granting groups some degree of control over their own affairs by different kinds of self-government rights, including the right to express their cultural particularity. (c) has the effect of containing discrimination and remedying the perception of disadvantage by securing the cultural interests of groups.

Alternatively, the demand may seriously be directed at the elimination of the framework itself. This may take the following four forms – Abandon the framework by:

- d) Delving deep into the resources of our distinctive traditions, particularly our religious traditions and rediscovering ways of living together woven into our lived experience and embedded in traditional practices. This demand is developed on more or less the correct assumption that the majority-minority framework is linked to modern democratic politics and to the formation of modern nation states. Modernity is the *bête noire* here; it begets the minority-majority framework and carries all its ills. In this view, then, the only way to get rid of the framework is by the rejection of modernity itself.
- e) The homogenization of individuals or by treating them as if differences

amongst them do not matter. This is believed possible by the transformation of ascriptive, identity-constituting features into preferences. This involves a conceptual and practical move from communitarian to an individualist understanding of majorities and minorities. Usually, this entails the replacement of group-specific by a uniform charter of rights.

f) The homogenization of individuals not by the process mentioned in (e) but by the assimilation of minorities with a overweening majority, by stipulating that only identity-constituting features of a majority matter in society. Special rights are again taken away from the minorities. For example, a watchdog minorities commission may be disbanded. It is not uncommon to find that when enforced uniformity is resisted, it results in the withdrawal of general rights as well.

g) The politics of the overlapping good. Different groups and individuals come from their respective standpoints, gather to deliberate over the good life, each making its distinctive contribution from its original perspective but ultimately converging on a conception shared to some extent by all.

**W**hich of the above demands is desirable and can be met? The distinction I draw and my use of the phrase makes it plain that it is always desirable to expunge the minority-majority syndrome. In other words, (a), (b), and (c) are desirable while (d) is partially desirable. Why partially? Forgive me for stating my views baldly. Modernity is a contradictory phenomenon that contains blended ribbons of the good and the bad. By exploring resources of tradition, it provides an alternative to the evils of modernity, but by exaggerating the importance of tradition and by being wholly blind to the good and the inescapable harvest of benefits it engenders. Therefore, it is not a wholly desirable option.

So, (d) is too caught up in the simple-mindedness of binary opposition of a pristine tradition contrasted with unrelieved evil of modernity. In any case

5. The majority-minority syndrome can also be set off when a minority resists the attempt by the majority to exclusively shape the social and political institutions in accordance with its own cultural predilections. Equally, a well-grounded syndrome may be caused by discrimination of the majority, as the case of blacks in South Africa testifies.

it is not even a real possibility. (e) requires a certain pattern of modernization that is sociologically naive in underestimating the importance and desirability in peoples' life of constitutive social attachments. It is ruled out because it is insensitive to how cultural identities matter to people. Most people in India are hardly likely to shed their religious identity. Indeed, religion will continue to be rather more like the colour of the skin than a consumable item to choose in the marketplace. (f) is undesirable because it can be realized, if at all, only by outright force and manipulation.

However, modern politics is not a zero-sum game and has at best only temporary winners and losers. Besides, democratization, an integral and irreversible feature of modern societies, has meant that strategies of enforced assimilation have lost even the minimal legitimacy they once possessed. Any asymmetry between groups is resisted sooner rather than later. It is therefore impossible to forcibly assimilate or coerce any group into the mainstream. (g) is wonderful, but realizable only in the very long run. In any case, even if it were realized on some occasions, it can never be taken for granted and therefore, a need to have a fall-back strategy remains.

**W**hat about demands that we must abandon the minority-majority syndrome? (a), (b) and (c) are all desirable. However neither (a) nor (b) are immediately realizable. It is difficult if not impossible to free ourselves of prejudice or of the feelings of discrimination. So, given (b), and the ineradicable differences between groups and given also that both (a) and (g) are valuable regulative ideals, (c) seems to be the only realistic possibility. (c) not only entails a framework of basic rights to individuals but also cultural rights to groups; in other words, the retention of the minority-majority framework.

I hope to have laid bare before the reader the bones of a conceptual frame, disentangling various interpretations of the claim under discussion and sifting undesirable from desirable interpreta-

tions. I end by addressing one objection to the view that we must retain the minority-majority framework. Isn't this talk of groups and communities, especially the admission of group rights into constitutional democracies, inimical to or at least incompatible with moral individualism and individual rights? This fear stems from two sources. One, that group rights may override individual rights and therefore undermine individual choice or internal dissent. Two, once rights are granted to a group, the protection of minorities within that group becomes difficult.

**A** brief riposte: First, the opposition between group rights and free internal dissent is generated by an inability to distinguish a situation where values of one group are imposed on another from one where deliberating members of a group revise or reject their own values.<sup>6</sup> Group rights are meant to guard against the first kind of threats and are not intended to stifle apparent threats that flow from the second source. Second, the idea that group rights threaten internal minorities is mistaken. The decision to grant exclusive rights to relatively large groups and not to smaller groups within it is political, dictated by external factors and not by the internal, conceptual requirements of group rights. From a normative point of view, rights should be granted to every group that faces a real threat, quite irrespective of its size and or whether or not it is encompassed by other larger groups.

It is of course true that conflicts between individual and group rights do sometimes occur, quite like conflicts between individual rights, say between the right to free speech and the right to profess one's religion. But this is unavoidable in a morally complex world and exemplifies the more general problem of value-conflicts. When such things happen, compromise and reconciliation are morally necessary. The precise form of such accommodation depends, however, wholly on the context.

6. On this point also see Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, OUP, 1995, Ch. 3.

# Nation and the regions

JAVEED ALAM

RECENT developments have drastically altered the nature of relations between the Indian nation and its constituent states. Earlier, when the Congress party was in power, regional assertions had an inbuilt tendency to pit the regions against the Indian Union. The threat of regionalism to national unity became a regular part of political discourse, particularly since the sixties when this phenomenon found strong political expression. Also, it must be remembered that more often than not, most of the governments formed by regional parties were dismissed by the central government. Regional assertion was viewed as questioning the very definition of our nationhood.

Today, the manifold assertions of the regional identities have become a part of the definition of the 'national'. In a stroke, the antagonism between the two seems to have evaporated. This can be clearly seen at both levels of governance as also in the definition of what it means to be the Indian nation. While the expression of these two aspects is intertwined at

the level of practical politics, it is analytically easily separable.

Take governance. The government at the Centre now represents a co-governance of the nation and the various regions with the power of the Union constituted as much by those political formations which only represent the regions. Political parties talk of 'cooperative federalism', but what we are witnessing is actually a co-federal government. What is it that the Centre looks for from the state based political parties? It counts on them to make its power effective for governance. A combination of these regional forces is as much the Centre as are the national parties. The coalition is, in fact, a fusion of the nation and the regions. Here, then, is a basic change in the structure and the perception of the power relations within our national formation.

This development is important because after Independence there was a gradual reversal of the nationalist logic of the freedom struggle. If before Independence it was correct for India to question

the right of any external power to dominate it, define its situation, represent it and so on, after Independence the same logic was invoked by Tamil Nadu or Assam or whoever, that the Centre had no right to dominate or define them since, by the nature of its power, it was external to them. Many of these regions claimed that they too were nation-like entities.

Beginning in 1989, but more so after the 1996 parliamentary elections, there has been an erosion of this 'turned around' nationalist logic. The perception that the Centre dominates has, for the time being at least, receded into the background. This is the significance of the new form of governance.

It was during the recent crisis, in the wake of the successful blackmail by the Congress, that both the strength as well as the frailty of this development started showing up. The refusal of the regional parties constituting the government at the Centre to desert the United Front demonstrates that these formations have a serious stake in the experiment. Twice in ten months the BJP tried every trick to win them over, and each time the effort lopped. The regional political parties in the UF refused to entertain either the Congress or the BJP as dependable allies to form the government.

Interestingly, both the Congress and the BJP have advanced two contradictory, but nevertheless monolithic, definitions of Indian nationhood. In both cases it is a singular conception that informs their understanding of India. Both also link of India as a nation existing for as far back as one can recall. For the Congress, India is a nation modeled on the nations of western Europe where nationality and state are coterminous. Except for its immemorialness, the Congress conception is highly secular. The only concession it made in the name of Nehru is the nation's diversity, particularly since universities in Europe were coercively wiped out in favour of homogeneity. BJP's India is quintessentially a Hindu country. Or it a nation represents first and foremost the culture of its primordiality – in this case, Hindu religion. The effort there-

fore is to 'Hinduise politics and to militarize Hindudom.' For the BJP, the secular is therefore both alien and pseudo – a concession to the presence, as well as the influence, of the foreign.

At the root of this reversal is a legitimate grudge held by most regional identities, whether formed as state or not (for example, Jharkhand); that a singular, monolithic definition of what it means to be an Indian, a patriot, has been imposed from New Delhi; that the experience of being Indian in the North East or Tamil Nadu is not quite the same as the one in Delhi. The present form of governance silently questions these two monolithic, though contradictory, definitions of being Indian. But it is still fragile, since it has neither been institutionalized nor conceptualized. A conscious theoretical appraisal of what is happening is therefore urgently required.

The constant refrain of the TMC (Tamil Maanila Congress) after Moopanar's unsuccessful bid to prime ministership, that Tamil pride had been hurt, is an indication that if matters are not handled with sensitivity, there exists the possibility of a slide into regional exclusiveness. Or take the other comment by Moopanar that it is absurd to think that only a north Indian as PM can neutralize the growing influence of the BJP. Such situations, if pushed to an extreme, may once again give rise to a north vs south, or a centre vs states syndrome. Not enough sensitivity was shown by the national parties on this issue.

Given the absence of a theoretical grasp of the present form of governance, the left with its analysis of the national question could possibly play a decisive role. Unfortunately, the effort does not seem to be forthcoming. I had earlier argued ('State Autonomy Movements', *Social Scientist*, 111, August 1992) that these movements derive their strength from regionally specific class forces. Some, like the landlords or the rich peasants in Punjab or the non-big bourgeoisie in Tamil Nadu, have specific contradictions with the monopoly bourgeoisie at the pan-Indian level. The regional move-

ments have attempted to use the power of the state governments to better bargain with the big pan-Indian bourgeoisie. This was the source of antagonism between the regions and the Centre. This contradiction has to a large extent eroded, considerably strengthening a new sense of collaboration on the basis of the national being articulated differently. Today, in the wake of the liberalization policy and structural adjustment, states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are pushing for foreign collaborations. The regional bourgeoisie seems to be working under the assumption that by collaborating with foreign capital it can grow to become the big bourgeoisie.

Many regional formations which have been in the forefront of the movement for state autonomy, together with some national parties like the left, have today constituted themselves in a Federal Front as part of the UF. Each of these parties also represent regions where the BJP has failed to make a significant breakthrough. Assam, the north-eastern states and Tamil Nadu have often sought to reverse the very principle of pan-Indian nationalism to argue that the Centre has no right to dominate the nationalities. Such a sense of region, and the prerogative and exemptions it should enjoy, runs counter to the notion of nation that is central to the BJP's understanding of what India should be. This is likely to pose a major obstacle for the BJP in these regions.

There is a second limitation to a fusion of the national and the regional that we have discussed. Were the BJP to come to power because of all the bungling, collectively by the UF and individually by those like Laloo Yadav, a feeling of domination by the north and 'Hindu' could re-emerge and pervade the political climate due to the national chauvinism of the BJP. The same regional confrontationist mood, based on a strong nationality and state autonomy movements pitted against the Centre, may well fill the political space. The danger lies precisely here. Therefore, brinkmanship of the kind the Congress indulged in during the recent crisis should

be eschewed unless there is time for proper institutionalization.

What is it in the BJP version of nationalism, or in its conception of the nation, that appeals to the people of certain regions? We have already talked of the equation of the nation as Hindu in the BJP's conceptualization. Ever since Savarkar talked of Hinduising nationalism and militarizing Hindudom in 1925, the Muslim has become a suspect element within the Indian nation. Such has been a constant refrain within all hues of the militant Hindu right-wing, in all its incarnations at different points of time – as Hindu Mahasabha, RSS, its progeny the Jan Sangh first and now the BJP. Allied groups like the Shiv Sena may trace a different genealogy, but they too have come to similar positions.

**G**iven that Muslim mistrust and hatred has been a constant refrain, it may be hypothesized that it is only in those regions of India where resistance to Muslim rule has been a feature of the political life, and where the memories of this history have become a part of the collective consciousness, that the message of the militant Hindu right-wing finds greater receptivity than elsewhere. It is also interesting that the great Hindu cult figures which were historically elaborated and hammered into the consciousness in the latter half of the 19th century, were also drawn from these regions.

It is not that there was no Muslim rule in southern India or in the eastern parts. We all know of the Muslim rulers of Bengal or the Tipus and the Nizams of the south and many others. The fact is that in these regions, though Muslim rule was resisted at different times, this resistance did not go down in history as exemplary acts of Hindu courage against 'Muslim oppression' and did not therefore become legendary history. Nor did it give rise to cult heroes as the ideal Hindu personality model. On the contrary, some Muslim rulers from these regions like Siraj-ud-Daula in Bengal or Tipu Sultan in what is now Karnataka, became symbols of national resurgence or anti-colonial heroism and remain so to present times,

despite efforts of Hindu communalists. All this is in sharp contrast to what happened in northern or western India. A peculiar ethos of history as a weapon to vanquish 'national enemies' emerged in these regions. It is in this ethos that the message of the BJP finds receptive ground and manages to circulate effectively.

The notion of India as a 'nation' with a certain cultural mooring is unevenly refracted across different regions of the country. In the context of what has been discussed above, a spatial plotting of this spread may find that from the so-called 'heartland' the dissemination of the idea of the nation as Hindu moves down towards the western side of the country into Gujarat and Maharashtra and related cultural belts without any serious impediments or political resistance. It is only recently that the OBCs, with their politics of empowerment have shown resistance to the Hindutva wave. But, looking towards the south, one cannot help but discern a different pattern. Here one encounters a much greater insistence on being recognized as a distinct 'national identity'. This, however, varies a great deal across the different linguistic-cultural communities in south India.

**S**imilarly, in the east the refraction of this idea is not as smooth or as consistent as in the western side of the country. There are demands for autonomy or muted voices for recognition as different nationalities. This, of course, varies across Bengal and Orissa but is more strident in the tribal belt of Jharkhand. North East India represents a different mosaic altogether. This is not to suggest that the boundaries between the two contiguous belts mentioned above are rigid or even well-formed. Yet, it cannot be questioned that the notion of India as it exists in the different cultural belts of the country is certainly not of one kind.

For building a lasting, voluntary union of the people, at a minimum this reality needs to be recognized and the imposition of any *one* notion of India on all the regions of the country resisted. India is too large and diverse and it can

accommodate many varying conceptions of what it is. The unity of India is not dependent on any monolithic conception of what it means to be a nation, whether this monolithic conception is derived from the secular model of the nation or the pernicious Hindutva way of being an Indian. Both of these, in different ways, have been rejected by an overwhelming majority of Indians in many regions of the country.

**T**o sum up, this process of redefinition, though perceptible, is dependent on the continuation and deepening of democracy. And it is here that the collaboration between regional parties and the national parties in the United Front is of some significance. It is true that some of the important non-regional formations like the Janata Dal are inherently in a state of flux. The political formations of the backward classes in north India seem incapable of providing a stable foundation to the rule of parliamentary democracy. They are in a hurry to empower themselves and find it easier to do so by breaking the rules of the game and jumping the queue. This is a complex process, difficult to go into here. A number of their leaders and important supporters have police records, quite apart from their political behaviour which the established middle classes, used to decorum and etiquette, find reprehensible. Not surprisingly therefore, these political formations are summarily rejected by these sections of society.

To get a sense of their politics, we need to understand the disjuncture between the micro politics of these groups and the macro outcomes; in other words the intentions and styles and intentions and the consequences. Whatever the ugly characteristics of this politics, read sequentially, it has at the macro level protected and strengthened democracy and the civic tradition in politics; civil traditions by allowing for vulnerable minorities like Muslims to feel that the nation owns them and democracy by stopping, even if in a holding operation, the fascist onslaught of the militant Hindu right-wing or the Sangh Parivar.



# Limits of regional sectarianism

UDAYON MISRA

Sitaram Kesari's success in toppling the Deva Gowda government and in getting a prime minister of his choice installed at the Centre could not have come at a more opportune moment for the Congress party in Assam. Ever since the death of Hiteswar Saikia and its defeat in the 1996 polls, the Congress has been in the dumps. Having lost, for the time being, its traditional base among the core ethnic Assamese who, despite major demographic changes in the past few decades, still play a central role in the state's politics and who are backed by a strong regional press, the state Congress leadership has been plagued by internal dissent and a sense of aimlessness. With dozens of its workers gunned down in the past few months by suspected ULFA militants the morale of its rank and file was hitting an all-time low when Kesari's move brought the Congress once again to the centre-stage of the country's politics.

With the United Front's capitulation to the Congress on the issue of leadership, the Assam Congress suddenly rediscovered its voice and started to lash out at the AGP's failure to check extremist violence and initiate measures for the speedy development of the state. More interestingly, it also came down heavily on the Unified Command by accusing the Prafulla Mahanta government of virtually handing over the state to the army authorities and ruling by proxy. In doing this, it was touching upon the most sensitive issue in the state's politics today in the hope that, public memory being proverbially short, the use of the army by the Congress itself and the numerous human rights violations during its rule would soon be forgotten.

Nevertheless, during the past three months of its existence, the Unified Command hasn't obviously been able to achieve any spectacular successes against the ULFA. Rather, it has received a lot of flak for violation of human rights. Reports

of army excesses on the civilian population and deaths of suspected extremists in army custody are highlighted by the regional press with telling regularity. There is a general feeling, even among AGP activists, that by agreeing to the Centre's idea of a Unified Command and giving a free hand to the security forces, the Mahanta government has compromised one of his party's core demands — that of securing greater autonomy for the state.

The state Congress strategy of winning back the support of the ethnic Assamese by highlighting issues like army excesses and the slow pace of development must be seen against the background of overall Congress politics in the region before and since Independence. Ever since the late '20s and early '30s, the Congress has espoused the cause of Assamese nationalism and consistently harped on the need to preserve the Assamese national identity. As early as 1946, a Congress election pamphlet stated that 'unless the province of Assam be organised on the basis of the Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible. The inclusion of Bengali-speaking Sylhet and Cachar (plains portion) and the immigration or importation of lakhs of Bengali settlers on wastelands has been threatening to destroy the distinctness of Assam and has, in practice, caused many disorders in its administration. For appropriate solution and redress of this big problem, the Congress party should be installed as the majority party in the Assembly.'

One of the conditions on which the Assam Association joined the Congress was that the identity of the Assamese people must be safeguarded. Congress leaders, both during the pre-Independence and the immediate post-Independence period, consistently highlighted

the threat to Assamese identity by a continued influx from the then East Bengal and later East Pakistan. The successful fight put up by the Assam Congress against the grouping scheme under the Mountbatten proposals and the subsequent inclusion of the district of Sylhet in East Pakistan, gave the party a solid base among the ethnic Assamese and Assam became a traditionally Congress-ruled state till the 1970s.

The basically Assamese middle class character of the Assam Congress resulted in alienating it from the hill tribes and helped the break-up of undivided Assam. But such was the Assam Congress's hold among the masses that it succeeded in keeping at bay overtly Assamese nationalist organisations like the Asom Yuvak Samaj led by the firebrand Ambikagiri Raychoudhury.

**E**ven in the post-Emergency 1977 elections when the Congress was wiped out in north India, the Congress secured 10 out of the 14 Lok Sabha seats. It was only in the 1978 Assembly polls that the Janata Party was voted to power, in line with the change at the Centre. But, by the late '70s, the issues of demographic change triggered off by the influx, the pressure on cultivable land; and an increase in the numbers of unemployed caught up with the Congress. It increasingly began to depend on its vote-banks among the immigrants and the tea garden workers among whom its trade union, the INTUC held sway. The alienation of the party from the ethnic Assamese had begun. The price it had to pay for this was heavy.

Despite all the talk of vote-banks, the fact remains that no party can run a stable government in Assam without the support of the Asomiyas. Whenever the ruling party has forfeited the support of the traditional Asomiya base, its fortunes have floundered. This is exactly what happened to the Congress when it lost the confidence of the Assamese speaking people in the wake of the anti-foreigners stir of 1979-85. It came to be seen as a party which had, over the years, betrayed the Assamese national cause by encour-

aging influx in order to create massive vote-banks. It was also held responsible for surrendering Assam's interests to the Centre and failing to stand up to the insensitivity and prejudices of the 'national' leadership.

The regional parties and groups naturally took advantage of Assamese disillusionment with the Congress. A stir on the foreigners issue was launched by the All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, the latter an umbrella organisation of several small regional outfits, as well as Assamese nationalist organisations like the Asom Sahitya Sabha.

The six year populist upsurge was marked by a consistent attempt on the part of the organisers to marginalise the national parties and create political space for a single regional party to take over power. Thus, during the entire course of the agitation, mass hysteria was whipped up against all national parties belonging both to the left and the right. The Congress and the CPM were particularly singled out for attack because of their positions on the influx issue. One still recalls the juicy slogans that were raised against Jyoti Basu during the countless processions and demonstrations which marked that turbulent phase in the region's history.

**T**he allergy towards the national parties displayed in the course of the Assam movement spilled over to a general sense of distrust of anything with an all-India character. Even the vibrant trade union movement in the state was affected, with attempts being made to carve out distinctly regional trade unions. Calls for national level struggle were either ignored or resisted by the Assam movement (and later on the Asom Gana Parishad) leadership because these were seen as infringements on the spheres of influence of the regional outfits. One still recalls how the call for a *Bharat bandh* by opposition parties and trade unions to protest price rise and other economic issues was actively resisted by the newly installed AGP government in 1986.

Thus, in the 1980s, anything 'regional' was good; anything 'national' was

not only bad but also treacherous! Ironically, the AGP's main election appeal during the 1985 polls was for the preservation of an Assamese identity on the lines of the Congress appeal of 1946. In most of the Assamese majority areas this worked and the party romped home winning 63 seats and securing 34.5 per cent of the votes.

**T**he Congress, which had lost the trust not only of the ethnic Assamese but also of sizable sections of the minorities because of its inability to prevent programs in several immigrant pockets, managed to secure only 25 seats with just 23.47 per cent votes. The United Minority Front, an organisation chiefly of religious and linguistic minority bodies disillusioned with the Congress politics, secured 10.85 per cent votes and captured 17 seats in the 126 member Assembly. The left parties fared miserably, with the CPM getting only two seats (as against the 11 seats it had secured in the 1978 polls), while the CPI drew a blank for the first time in the state's electoral history.

It did not take long for the first ever regional party government to realise that given the demographic picture of the state it was imperative for it to shed its image of being a party of the Assamese middle class. With a Congress government at the Centre, it was difficult for the AGP government to deliver even a fraction of its election promises and the much lauded Assam Accord became an albatross around its neck. The rise of ULFA and Bodo militancy during the AGP's tenure not only halted the party's attempts to extend its electoral base among the minorities but helped to switch the vote of the plains tribals and other non-Assamese in favour of the Congress thereby paving the way for its defeat in the 1991 assembly elections.

While the AGP and its splinter group, the Natan Asom Gana Parishad, secured 23.98 per cent votes, the Congress secured 65 seats with just 28.98 per cent votes. Interestingly, the AGP got almost the same number of seats and votes as the Congress got in the 1985 polls. More than half the seats won by the Congress were

from constituencies where the Assamese were a minority. It was evident from the rout of the UMF that the Congress had once again succeeded in winning over the trust of the immigrant Muslim voter, while its vote-bank among the tea workers remained more or less intact. Measures like the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act which made it difficult to detect and deport illegal immigrants by shifting the onus of proof from the immigrant to the citizen who brings the charge, went a long way in helping the Congress regain lost territory in immigrant pockets.

**A**fter its defeat at the 1991 polls, the AGP made a serious effort to counter the Congress influence by reaching out to parties like the CPI and the CPM which it had once considered untouchable. The common front which it forged with the CPI, the CPM and the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) paid it rich dividends and the AGP led combination was returned to power in the 1996 elections. This time the AGP secured 59 seats and registered some significant victories in non-Assamese majority constituencies. The Congress could secure only 34 seats though its percentage of votes polled went up to 30.57 per cent. On the surface, the Congress lost because the AGP had succeeded in forging an electoral alliance with the left parties, thereby preventing division of opposition votes. Moreover, the tribal policy of the Congress, which was based on divide-and-rule, had alienated both the Assamese and the tribals.

But one of the key factors in the AGP victory was the support it received from the ULFA. This support ensured an AGP victory not only in many Assamese majority constituencies but also in several immigrant and tribal pockets where the ULFA wielded considerable influence. The support from ULFA was predicated on the AGP's promise to release the militants held under TADA and to withdraw the army once it came to power. The AGP government did release several top leaders of the ULFA on assuming office, but the ground realities were such that it was impossible for it to run the state without the aid of the security forces. The ULFA,

therefore, was soon to demand its pound of flesh.

Once in power, the AGP faced the same dilemmas as the Congress and was plagued by the same symptoms of corruption and nepotism. The AGP's overall perspective has significantly changed since the 1985 polls and it successfully managed to break out of the confines of sectarian politics. However, on most of the major issues facing the state, the party had little new to offer. The road it is treading today appears frighteningly similar to the one taken by the Congress when, as a national party, it began by catering primarily to Assamese national interests, but finally ended up with a predominantly non-Assamese support base. In its effort to prove its bona fide as a 'regional party with a national outlook', the AGP, after some initial hesitation, decided to become part of the United Front government at the Centre.

**T**he AGP move is a positive development in the background of the changing political scenario of the country, where regional parties are playing an increasingly decisive role at the Centre. Yet, this has pitted it against forces which see central involvement as a betrayal of the Assamese cause and as a surrender to the forces of pan-Indianism. The type of politics on which the AGP initially built its base has today proved to be a great embarrassment to the party. Being part of the government at Delhi has taken much of the edge off its rhetoric about more powers to the states and 'self-rule'. Mere talk of federal restructuring by the AGP will eventually have few takers.

This is a theme that has already been harped on in the state by none other than the Assam Congress. It may be recalled that during the Constituent Assembly debates, the Assam Congress leaders led by Gopinath Bordoloi had voiced similar demands centred on political and financial autonomy to the states. But within just two decades of Independence, the same Congress was accused of total capitulation before the central leadership.

In a similar vein, the ULFA today has termed the Prafulla Mahanta govern-

ment as a lackey of the Centre and as an integral part of an exploitative Indian state. The AGP government's feelers for talks have been consistently rejected by the militant outfit which views the Unified Command as a direct threat to the very existence of the Assamese people. The ULFA, in a recent statement, has not only accused the AGP of surrendering to the machinations of the Indian 'colonial' state but of also being responsible for several of the pogroms carried out against the linguistic and religious minorities during the Assam movement.

**I**n a telling revelation, its publicity secretary recently named two AGP ministers as being directly responsible for the murder of immigrants during the anti-foreigner stir. Such accusations, coming at a time when the AGP is trying to widen its base among the minorities, are bound to affect the overall credibility of the party. Hence, today it has been forced by circumstances to adopt a virulent anti-Congress and anti-ULFA position.

The AGP position vis-a-vis the ULFA has, in turn, led to charges not only from the ULFA but also from organisations like the All Assam Students Union and the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad. They accuse the AGP of selling out the state's interests to the Centre in an urge to prove its national credentials. Ironically, it was much the same charge that had been levelled against the Congress in the seventies. The wheel seems to have come full circle.

Therefore, in the given circumstances, it would be absolutely necessary for the AGP to maintain its anti-Congress posture if it is to retain its image as a regional party. It will be left with no alternative but to quit the United Front if the Congress were to join it. Though many an AGP activist would prefer such a course, this would be unfortunate. The AGP, despite heavy odds, is attempting to carve out a distinct political space for itself in the context of national politics. A change of equations in New Delhi might once again push it back into the groove of sectarian politics.

# Beyond coalition politics

AMARESH MISRA

It was a hiccup which refused to subside. The political crisis which began with the dramatic happenings of 30 March did not end with the removal of Deve Gowda, the pebble in the Congress eye. His replacement, I.K. Gujral, did not face trouble from the well-greased hands of the Congress President Sitaram Kesri. His discomfiture came through a source closer home – the rough reprimands of his party, the Janata Dal President and Bihar Chief Minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav. Incensed over his charge-sheeting by the CBI in the multi-crore fodder scam, he threatened the United Front government with a new crisis.

Gujral, however, could take solace over the safe passing of Chidambaram's dream budget following the smooth return of the TMC to New Delhi. But a major player within the United Front, the CPI-M, came out against the proposed cut in taxes. The prime minister's appeal for consensus made in his inaugural speech in the Parliament was turned down by the BJP, the principal opposition party. But more importantly, promises of transparency, accountability, electoral reforms and so on, while sounding good to the ear, did not carry much conviction.

In public perception, Gujral was a man of the intelligentsia who spoke well but said little. He did not spell out his thinking on health, education, the abysmal state of infrastructure, or on his vision for rural development. The plank of social justice sounded like the repetitive dialogues of a hit film well past its prime. Promises to maintain the secular unity of the country came across as the much lampooned slogan of *Garibi Hatao*.

Even within the intelligentsia which seemed to support or give a fair chance to the sedate intentions of the new South Block sophisticate, the issue was not whether Gujral could do something new. It was whether he would last beyond the year as an 'autonomous' prime minister, free from opposition and Congress pressures and the bullying tactics of the mushrooming power centre, the new syndicate.

A strange pall of gloom seems to hang over the Indian political system even as fresh political experiments are being tried and new prescriptions meted out for what ails the country. Tremendous changes have occurred in the recent years which would make any 'democracy' proud. New social forces have risen, the excruciating long one party innings of the Congress has ended, and rule by coalitions or federalization of power is underway.

But even as the national scene is revved up by sounds of new starts and shifting gears, a deep sense of anxiety is palpable. None of what is happening seems to be geared to any concrete direction; new developments are taking place everyday but there seems to be little understanding of their long term consequences. Even the short term analysis is devoid of realism: the debate on coalition politics currently reflected in major journals and newspapers is like a smart classroom exercise in which brilliance is judged by the variation in style, not the line, of answers. But what are the pulls and pressures in society which are dictating this new trend in Indian politics? Why is coalition politics simultaneously witness

ing the widespread breakdown of civil order, the ominous rise of criminals and an ongoing polarisation in Indian society, not quite the recipe for consensus.

**T**he most visible feature of the present scenario is the persistent state of instability. It is not simply a case of five governments assuming office in a space of eight years, the last one lasting barely for a year. Short reigns of governments are not in themselves bad, provided an agenda guides their rise and fall.

The withdrawal of support by Sitaram Kesri indicated a problem of 'space' at the national level. V.P. Singh in an interview to 'The Times of India' just after I.K. Gujral was installed, predicted the future of three formations in India – the United Front, the BJP and Congress. But these three formations are competing for two available spaces – that of the right and the centre. The left space is ruled out not only for the right but the centre as well. The categorisation of left in an independent slot, given the 'merger' of the CPI and the CPI-M into the UF, can be challenged. But that would be simplistic. The two traditional communist parties, till they shed their identity, will continue to be perceived as left. They will have to both oppose and demarcate themselves from the centre and the right. And when they do shed their identity or take a different course, then in all likelihood some other force will emerge to replace them. Currently all three major left formations in mainstream politics – the CPI, CPI-M and the CPI-ML (Liberation) – are in fact more visible than before.

For the UF, Congress and the BJP the competition is poised to enter the elimination round. It is clear that the BJP for further growth has to replace either the Congress or the United Front. The Congress for survival has to emerge as the principal contender to the BJP. And the United Front in order to sustain its relevance has to sideline the Congress and project itself as the major enemy of the BJP. Can a 'coalition' be stable under these circumstances?

Behind the centrist bonhomie which marked the support of the Congress

to the United Front last year there was an intense, cut-throat rivalry. Deve Gowda was not being 'bad' or over-zealous in marginalising the Congress; he was just serving the interests of his political calling. Nor was he just pandering to communal politics when he met Bal Thackeray in Maharashtra; he was merely trying to enlist a potential ally against the Congress. His overtures to Narasimha Rao were also not meant to build a pro-United Front faction within the Congress. Rather, they were calculated to effect a new polarisation – comprising of dissidents in the Congress, sections of the Rao group, the Shiv Sena and Waghela in Gujarat.

**S**imilarly, Sitaram Kesri was not overcome by a sudden desire to save his skin in a CBI enquiry. Nor was he unduly distressed by UF ministers taking senior Congress leaders for granted. Chidambaram's budget had consolidated the United Front government's hold over the policies of the Congress. The apprehension was that in the post-budget scenario the same might happen to its different constituencies in the long run. Kesri actually retrieved the Congress from the trap in which it was caught – that is why, despite dissensions, the party fell in line on 11 April.

The BJP was understandably happy at the dramatic turn of events. For in the event of a poll, it had a weak contender to face in the shape of the Congress or the UF. The BJP occupies a right wing space but it has no large 'historical' base of its own. The post-Independence Congress was spread over a range which veered from right to left of centre. When the BJP emerged, it was principally on the basis of traditional Congress votes. Its first major success was in U.P., the classic ground of Congress centrist politics. Its second success was in Gujarat where it snatched the votes of both the Congress and the traditional centrist opposition to the Congress, the erstwhile socialists, forces of Congress (O) and so on who formed the Janata Party and later the Janata Dal.

The BJP stands to gain either by replacing the Congress or by becoming its

principal opponent. In some states the Congress is faced with the constituents of the United Front, with the BJP not directly in the picture. But in north India the situation is either of the BJP vs the United Front (U.P. and Bihar) or the Congress vs the BJP (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan). It is tailor-made for each of the parties to try and eliminate the other, even to ensure a 'proper' fight between 'two' forces.

This situation can be characterized as post-Congress instability – one where, after the shrinking of the Congress umbrella, no formation, including the 'new' Congress, is seen as a replacement. The test case, as always, are U.P. and Bihar, for this is where the decline of the Congress began. Since 1989 both states have witnessed a phase of instability which is not just political in nature but encompasses all spheres from society to economy, be it political, parliamentary deadlock or increasing social unrest.

**I**n U.P., successive elections have failed to throw up majorities. The last time a single party was swept into power was in 1991, when Kalyan Singh became the chief minister on the Mandir wave. That regime was unique as the party enjoying majority power was forced to destabilise itself – it had to demolish a mosque which led to its dismissal and plunged the state into uncertainty. This act proved that the BJP's majority was inherently unstable – based as it was on sentiment and emotion rather than a new coalition of social and class forces.

Such a coalition comprising of three social forces – the brahmins, Muslims and the dalits, was earlier forged under the Congress. Yet, this was not a simple 'coalition' in the sense now understood. The leadership was clearly defined – brahmins, banias and the power brokers from among the Muslims and the scheduled castes acting in the interest of the Indian ruling class or establishment. More an equation than a coalition, it broke under internal and external strains – the growing Muslim and dalit restlessness, their moving away from the liberal brahmin shade, the metamorphosis of that shade into a more conservative form



of politics, and the rise of backwards as aspirants to power.

The break-up of the Congress equation was a direct result of the policies followed by Indira Gandhi after her return to power in the early '80s and then later by Rajiv Gandhi. This was a policy of soft communalism, hard authoritarianism and naked encouragement to the 'capitalist-imperialist-bureaucratic-neo-feudal' pattern of economic growth. Thus, there were clear cut 'class' reasons behind the break-up of the Congress equation manifested in the 'right wing shift' effected by the last two premiers of the Gandhi family. In U.P. and Bihar, this right wing shift provoked a revival of upper caste feudal reaction in the face of a growing demand for change.

**T**his sentiment later allied with the BJP. But during the struggle in the '80s, principally between the social constituents of the Congress, it was the middle forces and fence-sitters, the backwards, who gained the most. Once the Congress declined they stepped into the vacuum. The dalits and the Muslims allied with them in Bihar, leading to the emergence of a 'stable' alternative to the Congress in the shape of Laloo Prasad Yadav. In U.P., however, this alternative was challenged by the conservative upper caste BJP. The post-Congress political space was thus split evenly, between the backwards and upper caste forces. In U.P., therefore, a stable political order was plagued right from the start, given the tussle between leading power groups.

The situation in U.P. was further complicated by the rise of a third aspirant – the dalit group led by the BSP. It was also marked by the failure of the dalits, backwards and the Muslims to get together. This was, and still is, the great mystery of U.P. and holds the key to an understanding of the current political stalemate in India. The possible equation of these three forces was sabotaged by the existing social and class reality of the state where a transfer of power from the upper to the lower castes required something more – possibly a radical break from the legacy of the Congress, not a mere re-adjustment in the existing status quo.

In Bihar, the backwards, hitherto excluded from power, were a single powerful group who had already replaced the upper castes, especially in rural areas. In U.P., the Congress legacy was spread more horizontally and evenly. Moreover, a sizeable section of elites from within the backwards and the dalits were, along with the upper castes, a part of the status quo for generations. It is thus that the backward-dalit combination in U.P. has been unable to effect a break, even superficially, with the old legacy.

A backward-dalit-Muslim combine could not have sustained itself in U.P. merely on anti-upper casteism. It needed something more, a secularism different from that of the Congress, a social justice plank going beyond reservations, and an agenda for social change going beyond caste. Interestingly, it was only when the caste phenomena in the form of a SP-BSP alliance was successful in the 1993 U.P. assembly elections, that it was seen to have acquired a national significance. But, ironically, it was in U.P. that it proved to be the most unstable. Similarly, communalism as politics was thought to be a prerogative of U.P. However, this too failed to provide an electoral majority to its most representative party.

**T**he Congress in its heyday was sustained not just by caste or community but by an ideology and a balance of class-social forces. The forces which are now trying to replace it know that caste or community can only serve short term interests – they can never help forge a stable politics. What U.P. needs is a new secular agenda and a new balance of class-social forces. The BJP, SP and the BSP are all incapable of providing this.

The BJP on paper is the strongest party but it is locked into a peculiar dilemma. It cannot become the old liberal Congress, and its communal Jan Sangh plank will not work beyond a point. Its only alternative is to become a conservative Congress. But for that it needs a social movement, a break, even if at the token level, with the status quo. It would require at least some success on the peasant,

youth, student or the dalit fronts. It would also mean keeping away from powerful criminals who call the shots in U.P. Stability cannot be provided in U.P. merely by promises of better governance. What about the aspirations of new social forces, the pressing issues of different social segments? What about improving not only the law and order situation but a bludgeoned civil society? It is openly alleged that top criminals enjoy leadership positions in the state unit of the BJP. Further, leave alone reaching out to new forces, the BJP has even failed to attract the Kurmis and Koeris from within the backwards, important segments in immediate political calculations.

**T**hese forces have been alienated from Mulayam Singh and the BSP as well. As a result, all the three major formations have failed to build a new political equation. The BJP tried to operate with an upper caste-backward caste alliance, the BSP with a Muslim-MBC-dalit coalition, and Mulayam Singh through an upper caste-backward caste-Muslim plank. Their failure proved that a unity of caste oriented power groups is not feasible in U.P. They drift to other formations at the slightest provocation. Besides, their own base is unstable. They serve more as pawns in political bargaining than a basis for comprehensive politics. The only option for the major players was that followed by Kanshi Ram and Atal Bihari Vajpayee – of getting together the BJP and the BSP in a coalition government. But a coalition of parties is not a new equation of social forces. It is at best a temporary arrangement of doubtful electoral relevance.

Many pundits and commentators of the Indian political scene saw a new dawn in coalition politics after the BSP-BJP tie-up. They forget, however, that these kind of alliances seldom translate into votes. In fact, the ordinary workers of the BJP and the BSP have a more realistic assessment of the ground situation in U.P. They know that it is primarily a move to keep Mulayam Singh out and protect party workers, more a tactics of survival than a way out of a political stalemate. It was the same with Mulayam Singh dur-

ing the days of President's rule when he ruled by proxy. He too was merely ensuring his political survival by staying close to the reigns of power. The BJP gameplan of using the BSP to gain power at the Centre through an electoral alliance (in which the BSP gets a majority of seats in assembly elections while the BJP gains at the time of parliamentary hustings) smacks of short term opportunism without even a pretension of stability. That too if it succeeds, which seems unlikely at present.

**T**he BSP-BJP tie-up may have temporarily ended the deadlock in U.P. The BSP may also have given the dalits an illusion of being in power. But this triumph was achieved at the cost of surrendering certain basic 'anti-Manuvaadi' principles. More crucially, it was achieved by sacrificing the dalit aspiration for power in the long run. The BSP-BJP alliance was a compromise of the rural poor and the landed gentry against backward caste kulaks represented by Mulayam Singh. Such a situation is reminiscent of the pre '80s position, where the same 'compromise' of class forces worked under the leadership of the Congress against the backward caste peasantry, then represented by Lohia and his Socialist party. So the BSP has only brought back the dalits to the point from where they departed from the Congress and began their independent assertion in politics. Disenchantment of the dalits from the BSP, and the ensuing turbulence, is thus written into this political script, howsoever long it may take to mature.

What the BSP has done vis-a-vis the dalits is similar to what Mulayam Singh did to his class and social base, the backward caste kulaks and the Muslims. Between 1993 and 1997, the SP president first backtracked on most issues affecting the kulaks and the middle peasantry. His failure on the sugarcane issue or to provide minimum relief to his constituents in matters of rural infrastructure, led to an alienation of voters and workers. Further, he failed to prevent the BJP's return to power. This undermined his links with the

Muslims which was premised on keeping them close to the seat of governance.

In Bihar, where seven long years of Laloo rule gave the impression of a real alternative in the offing, the crisis has actually shifted to the ground level. The fodder scam has done more than just reveal Laloo Prasad Yadav's corrupt incompetence. It has shown, in one stroke, the continuity of his backward caste-Mandal-secular politics with the culture of the Congress. That continuity consists in carrying the entire corrupt-criminal legacy of the Congress and broadening its base. During the period when BJP rose in north India, one question remained unanswered—who was really fighting for secularism in the country? The intelligentsia had surrendered long before the mosque was demolished; it shed a few angry tears over the 6 December incident and went back to a resigned, pessimistic mood soon after. Secularism was kept alive by criminals and a host of lumpen-neo-feudal elements, mobilised by Mulayam Singh and Laloo Prasad.

**S**uch 'secular' politics is evident in its most naked form in Bihar. Here, the Mandal phenomena became synonymous with suppressing the struggle of the rural proletariat and poor peasantry under the leadership of the revolutionary left. It should be remembered that when Laloo Prasad assumed office in 1989, the IPF, then a front organisation of the CPI-ML (Liberation), was also on the ascendant. It had moved from underground politics to participate in the parliamentary arena. It soon emerged as a radical, as opposed to a centrist, challenge to the Congress and the BJP. Laloo Yadav was used by the ruling power groups of Bihar as a 'buffer' against this new political threat. The chief minister admitted this in an interview to 'The Times of India' on 18 March 1997. When asked about the central problem facing Bihar, he replied that Bihar was facing a potential class struggle between the BJP and the CPI-ML; that he was a Gandhian who was holding the state together. There was no reference whatsoever to Mandal or even to Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan — the two figures

who symbolised the only attempt in post-Independence India to effect a departure, not a break, from the legacy of the Congress.

Stability in Bihar came at a price. During Laloo Prasad's reign, massacres increased tenfold and criminals took over the reigns of civil society in a manner reminiscent of a warlord culture. The Janata Dal has been a destabilising force in Bihar as it did not address the basic issue — that of a real transfer of power in favour of the peasantry, the rural poor, backwards and dalits, which had become imperative after the Congress defeat in 1989. But the restlessness of these sections, which emerged as a result of this failure, led the Dal to do an about turn. It even abandoned Mandal and the class interests of the middle peasantry to openly stand up in defence of the status quo.

The record of the Janata Dal in Bhojpur, where it aligned with the BJP-backed Ranvir Sena against the CPI-ML, is an eloquent testimony to the new reality of north India. Here, caste divisions have been transcended and the upper caste and backward caste power groups have united against the ordinary backward castes, dalits, Muslims and members of the upper castes. The issue no longer only revolves around land and wages. Rather, it has become a naked power struggle structured around the change in the balance of social forces.

**A**fter the charge-sheeting of Laloo the situation will only worsen in Bihar. Old allies like the CPI and the CPM have begun their distancing act and it is unlikely that a mere change in leadership will be enough to bail out the Janata Dal. What will happen should Laloo choose to form a regional party can only be guessed. The BJP, it is clear, will not get a majority on its own; even its alliance with the Samata Party is fragile and there are severe strains in the relationship. It is transition time, once again, in Bihar.

In the two most populous and politically important states, coalition politics has either failed or is 'alive' as an expedient short term measure. The three most viable political experiments of

recent years – Mandir, Mandal and Bahujanwaad – after working extraordinarily well for some time, have become victims of their own success. Hope is now being pinned on a fourth major phenomenon of contemporary history, the new economic policy, to usher in a period of growth and stability. But economics follows politics and not the other way round. The NEP by itself is an empty weapon unless accompanied by a shift in social forces. The only shift which its political visionaries can envisage is a patch up between the BSP and BJP, Mulayam and the Congress – coalition politics once again.

This, as usual, misses the point. What India needs is genuine economic and social change in a democratic, nationalist direction, even for healthy capitalism to succeed. Not a new economic policy which strengthens, instead of weakening, the rule of industrial and financial houses which had consolidated itself during the license-permit, import substitution raj.

**F**or too long has the debate in India focused around welfare socialism and the NEP, when the need is to go beyond both. Ultimately, the problem of generating capital from below and extending and strengthening the internal market will surface. And here land reform, investment in rural-urban infrastructure, health, education and a solution to the problems of poverty and unemployment cannot be avoided. This would provide an impetus to tap the immense amount of entrepreneurial wealth of the NRIs, besides boosting the confidence of indigenous private players and entrepreneurs. Relying solely on IMF-World Bank prescriptions and foreign capital for privatisation will not make India a major player in the global economic market. The same holds true of an economic line which focuses all its energies on maintaining the subsidies and rural developmental programmes of Nehruvian socialism which fattened a corrupt bureaucracy and created a network of power brokers.

Politically, the challenge lies in building a new alliance of entrepreneurs;

national capitalists, industrious farmers, honest individuals, the middle classes, working class, peasantry and the rural poor. And to vest power in their hands away from the monopoly of top business houses, landed gentry, lumpen bourgeoisie, corrupt bureaucracy and the like. Socially, it would mean the rise of the dalits, backwards, Muslims and ordinary members of the upper castes against the power groups and vested interests of all these sections. And at the federal level it would imply not only a unity between Chandrababu Naidu, Jyoti Basu, Karunanidhi and V.P. Singh, but between forces struggling for smaller states, those striving for autonomy in remote regions, and the radical and people's movements.

**T**he secularism of this new alliance will not limit itself to the Hindu-Muslim *bhai bhai* dispensation or equal respect to all religions. It would entail the revival of the composite Indo-Persian culture of yore: the symbiosis between Hindi and Urdu, the interpenetration of practices between communities and the creation of a composite culture as one Indian culture. It would also mean the creation of an indigenous, non-religious public space, something which the Mughals were once able to do. Secularism would then imply not an import of western ideas but an Indian ethic of individuality, scientific temper and a real separation of state and religion; not state munificence to all religions and ultimately, to the dominant religion.

The question of stability in India is bound up with the long term emergence of a new social equation based on a rupture with the legacy of the Congress. That is why even if the BJP assumes power with a majority, the prospects of stable rule will be remote. The scenario of a revived Congress with Sonia Gandhi at the helm would be worse: nothing but a stabilisation of a dictatorial and authoritarian regime which would not even provide the healing touch of Indira and Rajiv. The United Front represents, at best, a transitory phase – ultimately there will be a right-left, right-centre polarisation within it. This would benefit the BJP and the

Congress. Even now, the TMC's gameplan borders on avenging its humiliation at the hands of the left which was responsible for keeping Moopanar out of power. Outside the United Front, the TMC would have had little clout. Now, with the Finance Ministry once again in its bag, it can press ahead with liberalisation and force the left to either tone down its criticism or to move out. This could provide the opening for the Congress to move in, forcing the United Front to undergo a metamorphosis.

**I**t is common knowledge that notwithstanding the benign intentions of I.K. Gujral (especially on foreign policy), the centrist-liberal face of the United Front is now a thing of the past. The prime minister is too weak to implement even his personal agenda. And the system over which he presides is deeply corroded from within. Today's crisis demands a radical response – the building of a new front of left, democratic and federal forces active at the movement level with factions within dominant parties. Such a front has the potential of creating a new polarisation which could cut across the existing political spectrum – right through mainstream parties and, incredible as it may sound, extreme groups like the PWG and the NSCN.

This would represent a new coalition free from old, restrictive ideological shibboleths and imbued with a practical agenda. Indications of this trend are already visible in Bihar, which appears likely to set the agenda for north India, where the post-Laloo stage is underway. A significant possibility has emerged in the form of factions of the Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party, the Samata Party and the CPI-ML coming together to step into the vacuum after Laloo Prasad's decline. The CPI and the CPI-M have reacted positively towards this development and so have the smaller parties. Whether or not it fully materialises in the immediate future, this is a concrete manifestation of the new post-Mandal, post United Front situation, where the forces of social justice go beyond caste and community to resist the Congress and the BJP.

# A third front

KUMARESH CHAKRAVARTY

HOW strong are the conditions for the continuance of a third front of political parties within the framework of parliamentary democracy of the kind that is prevalent in India? Such a combination is supposed to be exemplified by the ruling United Front (UF). And, the issue has acquired added importance in the background of the experience of the UF government during the last year. For, the prospect of a viable third front or its absence will determine among others, the objective basis, within the sphere of formal political practice, for the completion of the structural transformation that is targeted in what goes as 'economic reforms' or 'the globalisation-liberalisation' process.

I use the concept 'formal political practice' for distinguishing it from the overall political structure or process as such, which is better captured in 'political economy'. The formal practice is determined, to begin with, by the specific state form, which has come to be characterised in India as parliamentary democracy. In a functional sense, I see formal practice as the sum-total of relationships among political formations, which, in turn, are substantially influenced by the electoral arithmetic. Major slogans, or issues on which the political formations loyal to the existing political economy, attempt to mobilise electoral support or create conditions for the expansion of their support base, emerge and operate strictly within a particular level of the

overall ideological system. It is the state – and I do not mean just the government or the tangible state apparatus – which is supposed to supervise the reproduction of that ideology. That does not, however, preclude the need for, and possibility of, the political formations articulating different variants of it mainly for acquiring votes. At the same time, simply because these articulations are all cited within the ideology of the system as a whole, their importance should not be undermined.

The communalist thrust of the BJP's articulations in a general way, and the associated practice on occasions, for example, does not anyway imply that the party has a preference for a different system or its concomitant ideology. But, it has serious implications for the state form. Besides, it can, under a favourable configuration, more successfully obscure the conditions for a rising class awareness among the working people. The slogan of reservation for 'other backward castes' has an opposite set of implications. As such, it does not call for any change in the strategy of development, or any significant redistribution of income and wealth. At the same time it can, under proper conditions, contribute to the process of awareness-building among the poor peasantry and agricultural labourers. By way of unveiling some empirical glimpses of the class correlation at work, I cite communalism and 'reservationism' as two different types in terms of their potential

for influencing the state form and class struggle respectively. The former is unexceptionably reactionary, while the latter, though only reformist in character, can acquire *democratic* implications, if there are political formations strong enough to strengthen the democratic content.

There is no difficulty in seeing the 'reservationist' formation as a potential ally and member of the third front, especially because of the specific historical context in which the demand for reservation has emerged. Similarly, there should be no difficulty in seeing the communalist formation as an enemy of such a front. What if both happen to take up identical class positions when it comes to economic reforms? If both become advocates of an economic policy that is preferred by – if I may use an oft-repeated jargon – the bourgeois-landlord combine? Such a development has actually taken place. Most, if not all, non-left partners of the UF have turned out to be as ardent advocates of liberalisation as the Congress or the BJP. The discussions on the budget confirms the 'consensus' in favour of liberalisation.<sup>1</sup>

No wonder the left parties are faced with a serious dilemma. The fall of the UF government, one can argue, will lead to either a mid-term poll under a caretaker government, or a coalition government led by Congress or BJP. And in the latter eventuality, some of the present UF partners will also join this or that coalition. What is of added importance is that the problem of immediate tactical choice has forced itself as a part of a larger issue, independent of the current situation. The third front was postulated as the embodiment of left and democratic unity, which, at one level of formal political practice, takes the form of united front of left and democratic parties. The idea of unity is based on the understanding that there are

inescapable contradictions between the different segments of the ruling classes, and that the conflicts within the ruling class combine have a strong tendency to sharpen and widen.

As far as I know, it is the CPI(M) which had clearly formulated the dynamics of the correlation of class forces. The party programme, initially formulated during the late sixties and the early seventies, says: 'The struggle to realise the aims of the people's democratic revolution, through the revolutionary unity of all patriotic and *democratic* forces with the worker-peasant alliance as its core is a complicated and protracted one. It is to be waged in *varying conditions in various phases*. Different classes, different strata within the same class, are bound to take different positions in these distinct phases of the revolutionary movement.' (Italics mine.)

It also says: 'The party will obviously have to work out interim slogans in order to meet the requirements of a rapidly changing political situation. Even while keeping before people the task of dislodging the present ruling classes and establishing a new economic state and government, based on the firm alliance of the working class and the peasantry, the party will utilise all the opportunities that present themselves of bringing into existence a government pledged to carry out a modest programme of *giving immediate relief* to the people.' (Italics mine.)

Inherent in the idea of a government committed to 'giving immediate relief to the people', is a government based on left and democratic unity, be that a *class* unity or unity of *parties*. Needless to add that unity in struggle and unity in government formation or running of it are inseparable. But, 'left and democratic' needs to be defined for adequate conceptualisation. What then is 'left-and-democratic', or just 'democratic'? Are the non-left partners of the present UF democratic parties? If yes, then what is the criterion for separating the political formations which *are not* democratic from those which *are* democratic? Finally, depending on the answer

to these questions, what are the prospects of left and democratic unity of parties?

I see no problem in deeming the left forces or parties as those wedded to a revolutionary systemic change with an attendant change in the ruling classes. The term 'democratic' here does not refer to bourgeois democracy – of which the Indian type is a modified variant – but to a political economy and state under a different configuration of class forces, as an interim stage between the existing one and socialism. In the CPI(M)'s criterion, the 'left and democratic forces direct their fire against the monopolists, big capitalists and landlords, and against the increasing influence of foreign capital.' 'By putting forward a political and economic programme distinct and sharply opposed to the platform and practice of the bourgeois-landlord parties and by leading the masses to realise it,' says a CPI(M) document of the late seventies, 'the left and democratic forces enable them to move away from the bourgeois-landlord parties and increasingly rally round an alternative leadership.' They also 'advocate a consistent secular outlook and are opposed to any deviation from it on the part of the government. They specially fight the Hindu chauvinist and obscurantist communal ideology of the RSS...'

Left and democratic unity of parties, however, has to be rooted in the unity of the corresponding classes and some strata of the erstwhile ruling classes. The same document goes on to clarify that, 'The left and democratic front is not to be understood as only an alliance for elections or ministry, but a fighting alliance of the forces for immediate advance – economic and political – and for isolating the reactionary classes that hold the economy in their grip.'

The performance of the non-left UF partners can be examined within this generalised understanding. Let us first take up the question of their relationship to the BJP. That they were keen to dissociate themselves from BJP or, at best, accept BJP as the coalition partner only as the second or the third best choice, cannot be questioned. To that extent the UF

1. The fact that left parties too voted for the budget has a different meaning. They recorded their opposition and reluctantly refrained from moving cut motions only as a tactical choice guided by the preference for avoiding a new crisis, which they thought would only be to the advantage of the BJP.



was anti-BJP and, therefore, anti-communal, i.e. if communalism is deemed as an exclusively BJP-related category. Let me mention in passing that the functional necessity for so deeming cannot be questioned either, especially in the specific circumstantial context of mid-1996. This despite the fact that Narasimha Rao has not so far chosen to absolve himself of the charge that he, as prime minister, had tacitly collaborated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, it is not impossible for a Hindu communalist party to underplay, if not even abandon for some time, some of the forms it had adopted earlier, or some of the major planks of the erstwhile system of its articulated ideology, and still preserve its basic character. In L.K. Advani's new rathayatra for example, *corruption*, not *Hindutva*, is the focus. The party can, similarly, adopt a more flexible position on the sensitive question of Hindi mono-lingualism, and thus make it easy for some regional parties to negotiate with a BJP-led coalition government. Parties which have to substantially depend on Muslim votes, are not, of course, as free to do so, irrespective of whether they are subjectively so antagonistic to BJP or otherwise.

**T**he possibility of a new alignment of parties including some partners of the UF, led by Congress or BJP, cannot therefore be ruled out. This means that the parties concerned may not see the objective compulsion to remain anti-communal. In that case the anti-BJP criterion for unity of parties in a third front will have lost a good deal of its relevance. As regards the anti-Congress criterion, some of these parties have already shifted in favour of aligning with Congress, if need be, while at least one appears to be positively in favour of

2. Communalism as such, or the forms of objectively communalist politics adopted by some political formations – with or without a defined communalist ideology – is a larger question which I cannot go into in this article. Let me only underline that I do not see much strength in the argument that the Congress party too, should be seen as a communal formation just because of the Narasimha Rao government, or because not all Congressmen are free from a deep-seated Hindu communalist value system.

it. And that despite the widespread recognition in mid-1996 that the substantial fall in Congress vote share was mainly caused by the economic consequences of reforms for the masses, the poor in particular. If some non-left partners of the UF are not unwilling to align with Congress today, then these parties do not intend to take up an anti-reforms position any more. In any case, they surely believe that the economic policy of their government, identical though with that of the Congress government, would not affect their electoral prospects. They cannot be unaware of the severe rise in poverty and unemployment during the reforms period, in combination with a higher inflation rate in essential goods, foodgrains in particular.

**C**an we then hypothesise that either the class character of these parties has changed, or the correlation of class forces has undergone some kind of change such that the earlier conflict between some strata of the ruling classes has been overtaken by complementarity? It is the latter which is evidenced in certain developments. Consequently, some new elements have entered the dialectics of the old relationship between different sections of capitalists or landlords and domestic and international monopoly capital during the last two decades in general and the last one in particular.

Let me first explain what the earlier situation was like. But, since space does not permit elaboration, I will single out two regional parties for my analysis: the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Karnataka component of the Janata Dal. When TDP was born under the leadership of N.T. Rama Rao, many saw in it a resurgence of some elements of Telugu nationalism. I need not go into that question here. Important for my purpose is the point that the TDP was, and continues to mainly represent the class interests of the local industrial capital and landlords.

As for the Karnataka Janata Dal, it is enough to note the following: First, it was first under the chief ministership of Deve Gowda that the state's industrial policy was wholly geared to liberali-

sation. Second, under the 'Karnataka model' of agrarian development, repeatedly cited by the former prime minister, the land ceiling law was virtually abolished for creating favourable conditions for large-scale capitalist farming, including investment by domestic big and monopoly capital and foreign capital. The Janata Dal nationally claims to be opposed to such a policy, and no party in Bihar could even think of introducing such a policy in the state. The Karnataka JD, therefore, has all the characteristics of a regional party representing more visibly the class interests of the local industrial capital and landlords.

At least until the early eighties, the contradictions between small capital and a part of medium capital on the one hand and big capital on the other, constituted the dominant element within the relationship between the two segments of capital and the corresponding sections within the capitalist class as a whole. If we look at the production linkages within the industrial sector, most of small capital and a good part of what is called medium capital, were suppliers of inputs or intermediate products to big capital. At another level, they were buyers of inputs and capital goods from big capital. In both cases they were dependent upon big capital and suffered an unfavourable terms of exchange.

**B**esides, under the old system of controls and regulation by the Indian state, it was monopoly capital which wielded effective relative power over the state. And, the pan-Indian character of monopoly capital happened to be seen as unfavourable to the non-monopoly segment, mainly regional capital. The case of landlords was somewhat different no doubt, but they too mainly depended on the local market and non-market sources of surplus realisation, and the state government was often a useful instrument for it. Both the classes therefore, were in need of a state government as their instrument. And, in the demand for reordering of centre-state financial relations, or in the idea of federalism in general, it was the aspirations of these two classes which dominated.

Within such a configuration there was an objective basis for some regional parties, especially the ones like the TDP, to adopt positions on some issues which could be seen as essentially anti-monopoly capital. And, an anti-monopoly position almost necessarily implies an empirically anti-imperialist position to the extent multinational corporations can be deemed as components of international monopoly capital. Whether they were equally anti-landlord can be debated. But, their mass support base being what it was, they could not have consistently sided with landlords on all issues, or handed out big concessions through the coffers of the state government, except in cases like subsidy which *can* benefit all sections of the peasantry.

Consequently, they were opposed to the monolithic centralisation of allocative and distributive powers, including the power to grant industrial licences, fix administered prices, and direct allocation of bank credit. It was in such a context that the objective conditions prompted the formation of such non-left regional parties. The dynamics of the given differentiation within the bourgeoisie as a whole also created conditions for these parties of potentially being democratic – in the sense explained above – even though they represented the bourgeoisie as a class, as long as we think of a class in an undifferentiated sense. The fact that some of these parties took formal initiatives during the seventies for uniting state governments in demanding a reordering of centre-state relations, is an evidence.

The correlation has been changing since the mid-eighties in general and during the nineties in particular. The extent and nature of differentiation within industrial capital has been taking on a more complex structure. It can be identified in several ways, and I can only suggest it in brief. First, some part of medium capital, and perhaps a tiny fraction of the erstwhile small capital have grown larger. Second, with the change in the composition of industrial products, the relative importance of different industry groups has been changing, sometimes

with a bias against the small. Third, a realisation of both these processes has tended to be uneven regionally.

For some indication from a quick glance at a set of data, let us keep West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra out of consideration. A good part of Gujarati capital has been a part of the pan-Indian capital. And all four states are anyway industrially more developed. Punjab is the much talked of case of large agricultural surplus not having been transformed into industrial capital. Uttar Pradesh is at the opposite end in terms of industrial investment and agricultural surplus, except the state's western part. Of the three southern states where industrial capital formation has been relatively faster – Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu – we take the first two. Apart from Tamil Nadu, these two states have seen the formation and continuance of regional parties. So has Punjab, but for reasons different from what I have stated above.

I have taken the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) data for these states for four years: 1978/79, 1983/84, 1987/88 and 1993/94. Industry groups together sharing at least 30 per cent of the state's total fixed capital (FC) stock in 1993/94 – electricity has another 30 to 60 per cent – have been separated for scrutiny of the growth rate of the fixed capital stock, the single conclusive evidence of accumulation. Average FC per factory has then been measured for those industry groups which acquired a significantly rising share of the total FC in all the selected groups. Growth rates in the number of factories and the stock of FC – assuming a flat inflation rate of 10 per cent for approximating the value at constant prices – for two periods is presented in Table I.

These provide only a *prima facie* view of the trend under scrutiny. A rigorous analysis is necessary for a

more dependable view. For reading the meaning of average FC per factory, we need to remember that some industries are inherently more fixed capital intensive. So, when these industries occupy a high and rising share in the aggregate FC in a state – when the average keeps rising faster – it would generally indicate a tendency towards relative concentration. The absolute size of FC can provide a corroborating evidence. Finally, FC in public sector units has been separated for ensuring that one is looking only at accumulation in the private sector.

A few highlights of the evolving situation are: Average FC fell during the first period in all industries and states except in wool, silk and man-made fibre textiles in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). Growth rate of the number of factories was much higher in this period. The two together mean that while capital associated with factories was on the rise, accumulation was negative. In the second period, Andhra Pradesh (A.P.) shows the strongest tendency of concentration, particularly in basic metals and alloys. The corresponding rate of growth in the number of factories shows that it was not all due to large pan-Indian capital. Karnataka follows A.P. in concentration. U.P. appears to be identical,

TABLE I  
Changing Differentiation Within Capitals  
Growth rate (per cent)

State	Industry Group			
	F	FC	F	FC
A.P.		30		33
I	24.7	Neg	20.00	Neg
II	02.67	32.62	05.40	62.27
Karnataka		35-36		33
I	27.26	Neg	17.58	Neg
II	01.56	09.62	Neg	09.87
Punjab		30		37
I	27.69	Neg	33.61	Neg
II	Nil	03.62	Neg	24.35
U.P.		24		28
I	01.04	02.77		
II	26.83	14.45		

Note: Period I – 1978/79-1987/88; II – 1987/88-1993/94  
F – Factories; FC – Fixed capital per factory; Neg – Negative.  
Industry Groups: 24 – Wool, silk and man-made fibre textiles; 28 – Paper, paper products; printing and publishing; 30 – Basic chemicals and chemical products; 33 – Basic metals and alloy; 35-36 – Non-transport machinery equipments; 37 – Transport machinery and parts.

but an unusually high growth rate in factories indicate the contrary. In Punjab's high FC growth in transport equipment, large bicycle manufacturers play an important role.

Has agricultural surplus played an important role in the process? Alternately, does fixed investment in agriculture show signs of accumulation? I have taken only tubewell irrigation (Table II) since it is overwhelmingly a product of private investment. Growth in irrigated gross cropped area is a reasonably useful evidence of private investment in tubewells. Punjab's is a somewhat non-comparable case, since most of the state's cropped area was irrigated by the early eighties. I need not comment on the data.

In sum, thus, differentiation within industrial capital seems to have earned new friends for monopoly capital and multinationals. New diversification has taken place within small and medium capital, and it has generally created a different kind of regional unevenness. No wonder, the southern states have attracted a high proportion of foreign direct investment in collaboration with regional capitalists as partners. Punjab and U.P. — and most north Indian states for that matter — are yet to catch up, since the tendency of concentration via differentiation has not yet crystallised there. The southern states have also shown a higher rate of private investment in agriculture. This can create stronger conditions for landlords — if not a section of the rich peasantry as well — to become friendlier to the market in general and international market in particular. The viability of 'democratic' parties in parliamentary politics thus seems to be declining. The search for a third front, in that case, will have to take a different route.

TABLE II

Gross Area Irrigated by Tubewells  
Compound growth rate (per cent)

State	1970-71 to 1973-74	1985-86 to 1989-90
Andhra Pradesh	18.84	11.38
Karnataka	-20.26	38.25
Punjab	7.26	1.20
Tamil Nadu	9.36	18.43
Uttar Pradesh	3.80	5.17

# Left politics

MANINI CHATTERJEE

SINCE 1967 when the Congress party first lost its hegemony in several states in the country, India's ruling classes have periodically tried but as yet failed to find a single, stable representative to rule the entire country. The shifting fortunes of various political parties, the ebb and flow in their support bases, the erosion of the Congress party and the ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party — all reflect the flux of a changing society with new social and economic forces clashing, and cooperating, with the old.

At the level of the central government, the impact was first felt in 1977 when the Janata Party swept into power and though the Janata rule lasted barely two years, it has left an indelible imprint. In the intervening two decades, there have been spells of apparent stable rule, always under the Congress: Indira Gandhi from 1980 to '84, Rajiv Gandhi from 1984 to '89, and Narasimha Rao from 1991 to 1996. But all three governments were unable to retain the support of the people towards the end of their term. Were it not for the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and her son, it is unlikely that the Congress party would have managed to win a thumping majority (in 1984), or a working minority (in 1991).

But the swing towards Congress in a moment of crisis quickly dissipated, with both Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao leading their parties to defeat. The inability of a single party to retain the confidence of the people has thus been a continuous phenomenon from at least 1977, even if masked by Congress victories gained in abnormal circumstances on two occasions in between.

It is only when we fail to note this continuing process that has been at work over more than two decades that the current political situation seems 'unprecedented' and 'exhausting'. On the face of it, these adjectives are not misplaced — two governments in less than a year, a dozen

odd parties jostling in a coalition, a minority ministry perched precariously on the uncertain support of a discredited yet still substantial Congress party, and the single largest party in Parliament isolated but far from defeated. Could there be, leader writers ask, a more chaotic situation?

Is the era of one party rule over and has the age of coalitions come to stay? Have national parties become largely irrelevant and can they only govern in alliance with regional forces? Do political parties have any sense of direction, singly or together, or are they merely groping in the dark, making tentative alliances and fragile coalitions, haunted by a sense of adhocism and uncertainty? These are difficult questions, almost impossible to answer at this moment when we are still in the midst of an unfolding drama that is nowhere near ending. It is all the more difficult because many of the actors in this drama do not believe in either prepared scripts, nor learn from past performances, nor even stick to their assigned roles.

**B**ut the left is different. Though confined to regional bases, the left is ideologically speaking an all India force with a national agenda, an internationalist perspective and a well thought out strategy. The organised left parties, of whom the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is the biggest and plays the leading role, are today important participants in the national political scene. What demarcates the left parties from the others is that their politics is not guided by petty ambitions or desire for ephemeral power. The left does not tailor its politics from one election to another nor choose allies in an ad hoc fashion for temporary gain. Rather, its strategy is based on a programmatic understanding and it is in pursuance of this fundamental strategy that the political-tactical line is worked out from time to time.

It is no one's case that the left does not make mistakes or that the left, because of its relatively greater ideological clarity and organisational discipline, has increased its strength compared to other

political formations. But its mistakes and the reason for its limited strength lie in another realm altogether—more to do with the nature of the Indian state and the correlation of class forces than any inherent personal or political deficiencies within the left.

**I**n the current context, the key questions are how much has the left gained within the parameters set for itself; what is its perspective on the United Front; and how can it increase not just its influence but also its strength in a complex political situation where it has to fight two strong adversaries with the help of allies who are not always reliable and are, for the most part, ideologically incompatible? The left parties, particularly the communist parties, hold regular meetings of their leading bodies and a party congress every three years to debate and analyse the changes taking place nationally and internationally and arrive at a common understanding on the basis of which they pursue the political line.

Therefore, some understanding of how its political line vis a vis the other political formations has evolved, and its positions and problems in the present political situation can be reached through a reading of the party documents. Though there still are differences within the left forces, and even within the organised left, for the last many years a certain left unity has evolved. In this article, the evolution of the CPI(M)'s understanding of and intervention in what it terms 'bourgeois politics' will be traced in brief in order to understand its current position and perspective.

After the split in the communist party in 1964, the CPI(M) adopted its programme in the Seventh Congress at Calcutta which continues to guide it. The programme identified the Indian state as the 'organ of the class rule of the bourgeoisie and landlords, led by the big bourgeoisie, who are increasingly collaborating with foreign finance capital in pursuit of the capitalist path of development. This class character essentially determines the role and functions of the state in the life of the country.' Even 33 years after the

programme was adopted, this characterisation remains valid. While adhering to its aim of building socialism and communism, the programme stated that the party '...taking into consideration the degree of economic development, the degree of the political-ideological maturity of the working class and its organisation, places before the people as the immediate objective the establishment of people's democracy based on the coalition of all genuine anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces headed by the working class. This demands first and foremost the replacement of the present bourgeois-landlord state and government by a state of people's democracy and a government led by the working class on the basis of a firm worker-peasant alliance.'

**W**hile this continues to remain the CPI(M)'s objective, the 'immediacy' of this aim has not been achieved because of the continuing (and strengthening) stranglehold of the bourgeois-landlord classes on the Indian economy and polity. But even as the bourgeois-landlord classes have maintained their hold as a ruling class, there has been considerable fragmentation within this class which is reflected in the erosion of the Congress party's monopoly and the emergence of other parties.

From the very outset, the CPI(M) did not remain isolated from the rest of the political spectrum. It backed and opposed bourgeois political parties on the basis of their immediate policies even while remaining clear-eyed about their basic class character. Thus, for instance the CPI(M) backed V.V. Giri's election and supported Indira Gandhi's policies such as bank nationalisation in 1969. It later backed the JP movement and participated in the anti-Emergency struggle along with non-Congress parties. But till 1978, the party remained by and large aloof from the nitty-gritty of non-left politics, seeking to independently build its own bases, an independence made even more stark in the early '70s by the desertion of the left allies—the CPI joining Indira Gandhi, and the Socialist Party becoming

a part of the rightist 'Grand Alliance' against her.

It was the experience of the Emergency – the need to fight Congress(I) authoritarianism and for the defence of democratic rights and civil liberties – that marked a turning point in the CPI(M)'s political-tactical line. After much inner party debate, the CPI(M) at its Tenth Congress in Jallunder in 1978, emphasised the need to build a *broad platform* and the need for *united action* with mass organisations and political forces outside the left spectrum in order to fight the threat of authoritarianism and Congress monopoly. Though the opposition parties may also belong to the same ruling class, cooperation with them was necessary in the battle against the bigger enemy, the Congress. The theoretical position was that the left, in order to pursue its objective of building a People's Democratic Front, must not only strive for the interim goal of a left and democratic front but also seek wider allies by utilising the 'inner conflicts and contradictions between the bourgeois-landlord parties.'

**H**owever, while underlining the need to have joint actions with all parties to fight for the defence of civil liberties, the CPI(M) emphasised that its strategic objective remained unchanged. The Review Report which was adopted ruled out 'any concept of strategic united front or united front government at the Centre along with the Janata Party, though our lending support to the formation of the Janata government and the defeating of the Congress party and government was necessary and correct in order to defeat Congress authoritarian rule and defend democracy.' It also clarified that the broad platform 'can never be visualised as a political alliance to replace the government at the centre,' and neither could such a platform replace the struggle for the left and democratic front.

From Jallunder onwards, the necessity to utilise the inner contradictions within the bourgeois parties became a key tactical position of the party even as it grew in strength as an independent force. The formation of the Left Front govern-

ments in West Bengal and Tripura were major gains that increased the influence of the party at the national level. The breaking away of the CPI from the Congress party following its Bhatinda Congress in 1978 also helped the then nascent process of left unity.

**T**he line on bourgeois opposition parties was reiterated at the CPI(M)'s Eleventh Congress in Vijayawada in 1982. The political report noted: 'Without ascribing loyalty to democracy and commitment to resist authoritarianism to any particular person or group or party, we still have to deal with these bourgeois-landlord opposition parties.... If we start looking into the history of the individual leaders of these parties, their defections and re-defections from parties, their basic class outlook on people's issues etc, in order to decide our approach to them, we land in an unreal position of spurning any agreement, alliance and cooperation with most of them.'

But the task of utilising the inner contradictions between the bourgeois parties became more and more complex as these contradictions assumed new forms. The most significant phenomenon here was the, at first gradual and then rapid, advance made by the Bharatiya Janata Party from the second half of the 1980s. In 1979 itself, when the Morarji Desai government fell, the CPI(M) had recognised the threat of the then Jana Sangh contingent and its attempts to hijack the Janata government. But at that time the Congress(I) authoritarianism under Indira Gandhi was considered by far the greater threat.

By the mid-eighties, when the BJP was still a miniscule force in Parliament with only two MPs, the CPI(M) was the first party to recognise its danger and warned against any alliance with the party. The then CPI(M) general secretary E.M.S. Namboodiripad was among the first to spell out the dangers of the RSS-BJP-VHP combine. The opening of the disputed Ramjanmabhoomi temple, the communal mobilisation by the VHP and RSS, the Meerut riots and Maliana massacre, were all indicative of the ris-

ing threat of communalism. From then began a differentiation within the bourgeois opposition parties between the secular and communal. And the left's endeavour, increasingly, became to forge an alliance of 'left, democratic, and secular forces' against both the authoritarianism of the Congress and the communal danger of the BJP.

The CPI(M)'s 13th Congress held at the end of 1988 in Trivandrum spelt out this line clearly. On the question of bourgeois opposition parties, the political report said, 'Since the last Party Congress, while endeavouring to build a broad understanding with these parties, the party's effort has been to see that they eschew compromise with communal forces and stand firmly with the left forces to combat all communal and divisive forces. But the leadership of many of these parties favour an understanding with the BJP in order to secure electoral gains. At the same time, there are elements and forces which want to take a stand with the left forces and would therefore like to eschew all understanding with reactionary parties. This has led to the emergence of two lines – the line of the left and that of the bourgeois parties – on how to achieve the unity of forces opposed to the Congress(I).'

**T**he left's line received a partial success. Its consistent campaigning prevented the BJP from becoming a part of the V.P. Singh led National Front but it failed to prevent seat adjustments between the Front and the BJP in many parts of northern India. In the 1989 elections, the Congress was defeated and the National Front formed with outside support from the left parties and the BJP. But within 11 months the left's warnings came true when the BJP brought down the V.P. Singh government following Advani's arrest in the course of his infamous *rath yatra* to Ayodhya. In the 1991 general elections, the bourgeois opposition parties finally broke off from the BJP. The partial success of 1989 became far more complete.

Noting this development, the 14th Congress of the CPI(M) held in Madras in January 1992 said, 'The CPI(M) and the left



were successful in securing the support of the Janata Dal and National Front to fight both the Congress(I) and the BJP. It is significant that for the first time a bourgeois combination at the national level came out openly declaring for an alliance with the left.' Yet another level of unity – among left, democratic and secular forces (in addition to the earlier slogans of left unity, left and democratic unity, leading to the objective of People's Democratic Front) was formally identified. The political resolution noted: 'This great effort to mobilise all left, democratic and secular forces to defeat the Congress(I) and BJP and to defend national unity, to foil the destabilising designs of US imperialism and to defend the vital interests of the people constitutes an integral part of the party's struggle for building a left and democratic front....'

**B**ut the isolation of the BJP from the rest of the political spectrum did not reduce its own growing strength in the country. At the 15th Congress in Chandigarh in 1995, the CPI(M) renewed its call to defeat both the Congress and the BJP and secure a broad coalition of forces in order to achieve this. The formation of the United Front government, which has managed to keep both the BJP and the Congress out of power is, in a sense, the crowning success of the tactical line pursued by the left for the past several years. The left parties played a major role in providing the impetus for the formation of the Third Alternative in 1996, and its conversion into the United Front government following the failure of the BJP to lure any of these parties to its fold. For the first time, the left parties joined a front which runs a bourgeois-led central government, though the CPI(M) refused to join the government in any capacity.

This brief outline of the evolution of the CPI(M) position shows that the decision to be part of the United Front has been a culmination of a process that has been taking place for the last 20 years. However, the question of how much the party and the left has gained remains complex. *It is something of a paradox that*

*even as the left's influence in national politics has reached a level it had never touched before, the correlation of class forces which the left seeks to change remains as, if not more, unfavourable than it was in the decades after Independence.*

**T**he changes in the world situation with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the brutal ascendancy of imperialism has been a big factor. The ruling classes in India (represented as much by the Congress, the BJP, and many of the constituents of the present United Front) are unresistingly championing the economic liberalisation offensive which poses an immense threat to India's sovereignty and the well-being of the vast mass of the Indian people and strengthens the forces of reaction. At the same time the danger of the BJP's rabid Hindutva which is also an offspring of the anti-poor economic policies, cannot be ignored.

For the left, the temporary success of its political-tactical line in keeping out both the BJP and the Congress from government has to be measured against the continuing inability to make an independent breakthrough in large parts of the country. The transience of the United Front as an ally of the left forces is already evident with the replacement of H.D. Deve Gowda by I.K. Gujral at the behest of the Congress party which is now waiting for an opportunity to join the coalition. Even as the left tries to keep the UF united and counters the pressures of the Congress, these efforts can only supplement, not replace, the objective of fighting for fundamental socio-economic change.

In terms of immediate tactics, it is to be seen whether the United Front is able to fight and defeat the BJP on the ground instead of merely keeping it out of power through parliamentary arrangements. Keeping the BJP out of power cannot be an end in itself; what is necessary is a range of policies and measures that can tackle the problems of poverty, inequality and injustice which spawn the divisive politics of caste and religion.

Since 1991, the left has been consistently campaigning against the new

economic policies on one hand, and against the communal danger on the other. But the fight against the economic policies and against communalism, at a fundamental level, are interlinked – one cannot be fought successfully while underplaying the other. On another plane, the exhilaration at the dawn of the 'coalition era' may also be misplaced. Coalition governments, particularly where regional parties are involved, have the potential to be more federal and democratic. But their ultimate worth can only be determined by the impact of their policies on the nation. The absence of a national perspective, the willingness to kow-tow to foreign capital and the Indian corporate sector or the half-hearted fight against communalism can be severe drawbacks.

**T**he immediate issues, such as the Common Minimum Programme, however, are not the only concerns before the left. The main question is how to retain its independent identity and pursue a left agenda while continuing with an engagement with bourgeois politics. The left's role and success in isolating the BJP and keeping out the Congress(I) has undoubtedly helped the left forces as a whole by creating an environment which is far from hostile. But this apparent cordiality between representatives of the bourgeois-landlord classes and the left carries its own danger of diluting, disorienting and disarming the left forces who stand fundamentally opposed to the present class rule. The plethora of political parties vindicate the left's stand that the contradictions and conflicts within the bourgeois-landlord classes have intensified and need to be utilised.

The challenge before the left today is to be in political proximity with the United Front yet maintain an ideological distance; to build militant mass movements while making parliamentary compromises; to maintain its class distinctiveness despite the exigencies of coalition politics. The strategic perceptivity of the left and its tactical manifestation in the current political situation is governed by this delicate, and difficult, dialectic

# Federal anarchy

KANCHAN GUPTA

EVER since the installation of the United Front government in June last year, political pundits who prefer to see themselves as oracles rather than mere chroniclers and analysts of present events and trends have been busy insisting that India has entered the era of coalition politics, that the days of single-party dominance are over, that the balance of power has shifted to the regional parties and that India is no longer a Union but a federation of states with federalism as the underpinning of the new polity. Perhaps this conventional wisdom would have been turned on its head had the collapse of the Deve Gowda regime led to fresh elections and not to the propping up of yet another power-sharing arrangement held together not by coalescing ideologies of the partners but by the single-point common minimum programme of avoiding a mid-term poll.

There is, however, nothing *nouvelle* about this wisdom; if anything, it is stale and has been proved to be fallacious more than once ever since it was first voiced with the formation of the Samyukt Vidhayak Dal (SVD) governments in 1967. Then, too, it had been asserted that the days of single-party rule and domi-

nance were over and that the states where the SVD governments had been formed had shown the way to coalition politics at the Centre. For all practical purposes, the Congress had been written off as a national political force; the need of a strong political centre to ward off centrifugal forces rejected since the states had come of age; and, a shift towards pragmatism away from ideology predicted by the political pundits of the day. All this, in a matter of months, turned out to be wishful thinking. The SVD governments fell one after another like nine-pins and the Congress swept back to power in the states and re-established its pre-eminence on the national political scene. The predicted era of coalition politics was over even before its dawn could ascend into high noon.

In a sense, the certitude with which the coalition era was predicted in the late '60s, and the certitude with which it is being predicted in the late '90s, bears resemblance to the certitude with which it was asserted that the installation of the V.P. Singh government marked the beginning of an era of transition in Indian politics – that power had shifted from the Congress to the non-Congress parties. By

1991, the Congress was back in the saddle and P.V. Narasimha Rao lasted a full term of five years as prime minister, a term during which he changed the face of the Indian economy. All this merely suggests that the oracles are not saying anything new today or different from what they said yesterday.

A less facetious comment would be to suggest that politics in the post-Nehru era, whether at the national or state level, has oscillated between single-party stagnancy and multi-party anarchy. If the Congress has failed to maintain its position as the pre-eminent political formation at the national as well as the state level, it is because its leaders, such as it has, have allowed the party organisation and governance to stagnate. From being pro-changers, Congressmen have become status quoist; since change comes with a degree of uncertainty, they would much rather prefer the certainty of the status quo. This preference for the status quo also reflects the Congress' crisis of leadership: It lacks dynamic leaders who are willing to risk uncertainty and tap the tremendous support that still exists for the party but is fast being appropriated by the others.

**C**oming back to the issue of coalitions and whether they have become inevitable, it would be instructive to first look at the country's past experience with multi-party governments; the record of the United Front; the reasons for the absence of a single dominant party with requisite majority; the predicted inevitability of multi-party formations sharing power; the permanence of such arrangements; and, the desirability of such arrangements.

If the SVD governments provided the first taste of non-Congress, multi-party rule, they also showed up the inherent weakness of such arrangements forged between parties with conflicting ideologies. These were not governments floated from a positive plank of constructive politics, as would have been the case had the parties' ideologies coalesced, but from the negative plank of strident, and often irrational, anti-Congressism. The leaders who forged these arrangements were not offering an alternative agenda

but were merely seeking to put themselves ahead of their rivals in the Congress. Many of them were former Congressmen, tired of waiting in the wings or slighted by the all-powerful party high command controlled by Indira Gandhi. Then there were the socialists who found coalitions an easy road to power, preferable to the tough path advocated by Ram Manohar Lohia.

**T**he Janata experiment of 1977-80 was a disaster: Individual aspirations and conflicting ideologies brought down the first non-Congress government at the Centre. While it is true that the Morarji Desai government was technically a single-party entity, the reality was quite different. Despite 'merging' themselves into one political party, the main components of the Janata Party retained their distinctive pre-merger identities and ideologies at the group level, while individual leaders refused to submit themselves to the rigorous discipline of collective functioning, lest they suffer loss of stature.

The illegitimate government of Chaudhary Charan Singh underscored this point further. If the Morarji Desai government was propped up by the right and the left from within the party, the V.P. Singh government owed its existence to support from both the right and the left from outside the party. Not surprisingly, both collapsed when the right and the left clashed. The farce of a government headed by Chandra Shekhar proved the irrelevance of trying to inject fullsome morality into an exercise dubious to begin with; declared intentions cannot form the foundation for a government that lacks a popular mandate.

This last point has been conclusively proved by the collapse of the Deve Gowda regime. Only the naive will believe that the Congress had a point in withdrawing support only to restore it at a later date. The former prime minister's real enemies did not belong to the Congress or Opposition benches, but the Treasury benches: It is they who are to blame for his short-lived residence at Race Course Road. If personal ambition and conflicting ideologies brought down the

first Janata government, these factors were also responsible for the fall of the Deve Gowda government. Indeed, it is these very factors which threaten to undermine the second UF government headed by Inder Kumar Gujral, ensuring its collapse, if not today then tomorrow or the day after. The declared intentions of the groups—the Left Front, the National Front, the Federal Front and so on — as embodied in what many would consider a flawless Common Minimum Programme, cannot but ultimately fail to paper over the differences between factions within the groups and individuals within the factions.

**I**ndeed, the United Front is anything but 'united' — this is inevitable, given the divergent and often conflicting ideologies of its constituents, the vastly different constituencies they represent, their differing short term and long term objectives and the over-riding, over-arching need for self-preservation. On the ideological plane, at one end are the left parties; at the other are the rest, barring some who have delicately balanced themselves at the centre. While the left component of the UF is glued to the dogma of class theory, the rest are practitioners of caste politics. The left subscribes to the need for a strong centre that will play the role of a distributing agency and control the economy; the others are uninhibited champions of regional parochialism, the politically correct term for which is 'regional aspiration'. (Tamil parochialism, and not pride, has been hurt by G.K. Moopanar being bypassed for the prime ministership.)

The short term objective of the Congress is to bide time and somehow prevent the entire top leadership from being marched into Tihar jail, for the left it is to establish itself as moral arbiters of the Indian polity, for the smaller parties it is to get a taste of power, for the TMC it is to establish its relevance in Tamil Nadu politics as opposed to the official Congress, and for the Janata Dal it is a question of sheer survival — not only of the party but also its leaders like Laloo Prasad Yadav. Then there is the objective of keeping the BJP out of power by all

means, an objective shared by a bulk of the UF constituents as well as the Congress. This also translates into a common long term objective of sorts, though overshadowed by the conflicting long term objectives of the main constituents of the Front.

It would not be incorrect to suggest that if the previous non-Congress governments owed their existence to the negative plank of anti-Congressism, then the present non-Congress regime owes its existence to the negative plank of anti-BJPism. The only difference lies in the fact that while anti-Congressism had – and continues to have – a political foundation, anti-BJPism is founded on considerations of crass casteism and rank communalism (if the BJP's Hindutva agenda is communal, so is the UF's pro-Muslim agenda), both of which should not be allowed any space in the political arena. Similarly, it would not be incorrect to suggest that if the previous non-Congress, multi-party arrangements foundered in the absence of any positive plank, the present arrangement that includes the Congress but excludes it from power and, to that extent, can be termed as a non-BJP, multi-party regime, too, will founder in the absence of any positive plank.

**T**his brings us to the twin issues of emergence of multi-party regimes and whether such arrangements are now inevitable. In 1977, 1989 and 1996, the Janata and UF governments came into being following the collapse of the Congress at the hustings. If the electoral space vacated by the Congress had been filled up by any single party, then there would have been no need for power-sharing arrangements. The hard fact is that the BJP is the only party which has exhibited the potential to occupy the political space vacated by the Congress. But an equally hard fact is that the growth of the BJP, easily the most spectacular among all parties, has not matched the decline of the Congress. It is because of the gap between the BJP's growth and the Congress' decline that parties which do not even command a tenth of the total strength of the Lok Sabha today find themselves

in the corridors of power. While the single largest party occupies the Opposition benches, single-member parties find themselves occupying the Treasury benches.

**T**hose who subscribe to the theory of inevitability of coalitions also subscribe to the theory that the BJP has 'peaked', that it cannot 'grow' any further, that it has been 'arrested'. The only problem with this view is that like their 'era-of-coalitions' theory, this too is a jaded line. When the BJP won 86 seats in 1989, it was predicted that the party had 'peaked'; in 1991, when the BJP pushed its tally up to 120, the same prediction was re-asserted; in 1996, the BJP scored 161. Since the last general election, every opinion poll has consistently indicated an upswing in the support for the BJP, suggesting that the party is bound to further consolidate its position. Given the rate of increase in the accrual to the BJP, the party is bound to bridge the gap that exists between its growth and the Congress' decline. Along with its allies, the BJP is more than likely to cross the hump in the next general elections and lead the next government.

Herein lies the catch. Such a government, arguably, will also be a coalition government. But, it will be distinct from the present or past coalitions to the extent that it will not merely be a power-sharing arrangement. The distinction between the two lies in the difference between the UF regime and the Shiv Sena-BJP government in Maharashtra or the Left Front government in West Bengal. Both the SS-BJP government as well as the Left Front government are distinguished by the fact that the partners do not have conflicting ideologies, nor do they exist purely on a negative plank of antism but on a joint programme of action that came into being before they contested elections as partners (and not as rivals) as opposed to the CMP that was drawn up much after an alliance of convenience was struck and to which nobody owes any allegiance (as exemplified by the opposition to the legislative quota for women from within the UF ranks).

But this is not to suggest that a BJP-led coalition will be the last word in coalition politics, nor does it strengthen the argument in support of the 'era of coalition' theory. India, historically, has survived centrifugal tendencies because of a strong political centre as represented by the court of the ruling dynasty, monarch or king. It has survived the trials and tribulations of transition from colonial rule to full-fledged democracy because it inherited a strong political centre (Pakistan lost its eastern wing in the absence of a centre and is still groping for one) and overcame social and economic problems precisely because of this reason. Those who advocate the case for a weak centre, wilfully ignore this vital point: India cannot survive as a unitary entity in the absence of a strong political centre.

**T**his, however, does not undermine the need for redefining the role of a political centre in the post-liberalisation era that has replaced the licence-quota-permit raj of the past. New Delhi can no longer remain a mere distributing agency; it has to play an entirely different role in the emerging global scenario as well as nourish regional aspirations before they turn into regional parochialism which is only a step away from regional separatism. But to fulfil this task, India requires a strong, single party to govern from New Delhi; not a gaggle of parties, each looking for ways and means to extract its pound of flesh through bargains that have already caused tremendous damage to the entire political class as well as to the polity.

The choice, ultimately, will boil down to either the Congress or the BJP. It remains to be seen whether the two national parties, in the strict sense of the term, are able to end multi-party anarchy. Instead of debating non-issues like federalism versus nationalism, let the people choose between what Sharad Pawar once jokingly described (a joke that now appears to be coming true) as Rome Rajya versus Ram Rajya. We can leave the middle space to marginal and marginalised parties with a larger than life left playing the role of their moral arbiter.

# The camera has two faces

BARKHA DUTT

IT'S a myth that has outlived its potential for truth – that the camera never lies is a lie. As a television journalist this is one of the first insights that you are forced to acknowledge.

The camera's ability to both manipulate and be manipulated is best exploited by those other masters of deception, our politicians. In an age of television news, a new breed of politicians has evolved – savvy with the soundbite, but more than that, actors, always playing to a full gallery. So Atal Behari Vajpayee has perfected a sense of timing, Mamata Banerjee plays the perennially angry, young woman, and Deve Gowda humbles himself and his viewers by weeping copiously on screen.

The lines between where the role-playing stops and the 'person' begins are often so thin that the viewer may never know the difference. Especially since it is television that often *defines* the very persona of the politician. Place a camera before Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav and he will invariably do one of three things – start milking his cows, chew with considerable relish on either his *zarda paan* or the nearest papaya at hand, and if all else fails, break into some self-consciously constructed words of English. All of these add up to convey the same image – that of the grassroots politician, one with the 'masses'. Laloo knows only too well that his projected idiosyncracies win him laughter each time, and in the process endear him to the viewer.

Recently, just after the fodder scam, we decided to profile the man without romanticising him. We were determined to bust the 'hero of the people' myth and

reveal the other side – the autocratic, near feudal aspect of the chief minister known for running Bihar like his personal fiefdom. But if average viewer response is anything to go by, we clearly failed. Notwithstanding the sharp criticism underlining the story, the lasting image with the viewer seemed to be that of Laloo with his flip-flop hairstyle, an even more flip-flop accent, waving his walking stick at the world in general. Much like Amitabh Bachchan in his early comedies, Laloo Prasad Yadav too knows that the 'country bumpkin' image has its own advantages.

And then there's the other kind of politician... that rare species, actually associated with integrity and honesty. The 'elders' of the political world – Atal Behari Vajpayee, Chandra Shekhar and Indrajit Gupta all fall into this category. But if you scrape the surface, there is one thing that unites these men – all of them have a larger than life persona foisted upon them by an admiring media, and yet all them have this somewhat nonchalant air towards both the media and the rough and tumble of politics. At the end, one suspects that this too is an image like any other – the slight air of disdain certainly keeps the aura alive. Anyone who regularly watches the live parliamentary proceedings on Doordarshan will have an acute sense of *deja vu* watching them speak. Much like Laloo Prasad Yadav playing out the role expected of him, our home minister too will invariably be caustic and abrasive; Chandra Shekhar will always play the maverick and defend whoever the criminal for the day is; and tilting his head and waving his hands, Vajpayee will always



bring the curtain down on the show by playing the decent man who is deeply wounded at the state of the nation.

**A**t the end of the day, the imaging process is so subtle and relentless that it is difficult to distinguish between authenticity and acting, both for the journalist and the reader or viewer. Given this, it is deeply ironic that another problem that stands between television and the *truth* is its acute dependence on face-value. In many ways the fact that television news asks for the 'soundbite' and wants everything 'on record' is healthy for journalism. It is often preferable to the 'source journalism' that defines the print media, where the source is often nothing but a fiction spun over a cup of coffee and a shared cigarette.

But what do you do when Ram Vilas Paswan tells you on record that he loves Laloo Prasad Yadav, when Sitaram Kesri proclaims respect for Narasimha Rao and CBI chief Joginder Singh insists that the fodder scam had absolutely nothing to do with his meeting the prime minister. What do you do as a journalist when public figures tell blatant lies on camera and the truth is evident elsewhere. There are not too many options, except to hope that the viewer is clever, or perhaps one should say cynical enough, to doubt and disbelieve the politician.

Often it is not just the viewer who needs to be guarded. Some of our politicians are so suave that as a journalist interacting with them, you have to constantly remind yourself to see beyond the given. Of all our parties, the BJP perhaps has mastered the art of using the media – ironic given that it was the one party that evoked heartfelt hostility in vast sections of the press. And yet the sheer oratory of most of their leaders, combined with the air of commitment and conviction that seems to emanate from them, has ensured that the BJP can do the most unreasonable things and yet project itself successfully as the most reasonable and balanced set of individuals.

So when politicians belonging to say, the Congress party, express conflicting opinions, it probably means that the

party is divided on a given issue. When the BJP does the same, it could well be a cleverly thought out strategy. For instance, a week before the Deve Gowda government was to face its vote of confidence, the party spokesperson Sushma Swaraj had declared with characteristic firmness that the party would *not* abstain from the vote. This, however, did not stop the party president L.K. Advani from giving television interviews to at least half a dozen private channels, declaring that abstaining from the vote was a very real option for the party. And he said it with so much earnestness that it would have been really easy for both the viewer and the interviewer to believe him. Only deeper thought would lead you to the conclusion that the conflicting statements of the BJP at the time were a clever attempt to keep itself in the news, one way or another. After all, as the single largest party in Parliament, it could ill-afford to appear as if it had nothing to say.

**W**hat is harder to justify is that the media lapped up all such obviously concocted theories, even gave them pride of place as a banner headline or the first story on prime-time news. In the end then, it is not just our politicians who are culpable. Like an author in search of a good plot, journalists too are always looking for a 'story'. If our politicians are not authentic on television, maybe it is because we don't want them to be. The 'truth' carries the danger of being bland, dull and straightforward, certainly not the stuff that 'good copy' is made of. As journalism defines and redefines itself in the nineties, it seems that it is no longer enough to report the 'truth' – the ratings/circulation game has meant that news must *entertain* as well. So, much like the televised O.J. Simpson trial in America acquired as faithful a fan following as a top soap opera, here too we look, more than ever before, for the 'drama' in news. It is for this reason that Laloo Prasad Yadav will continue to be chased by camera crews and it is for this reason that, in the nineties at least, better actors may just make better politicians.

# Political continuity

Jaipal Reddy speaks with Ashok Singh.

*Recent events have thrown the country into turmoil. Deve Gowda had to resign on 11 April after losing the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha – after Congress President Sitaram Kesri withdrew support to the Deve Gowda government on 30 March. I.K. Gujral was sworn in as Prime Minister and has won the vote of confidence. We now have a new government in place. How much time are you giving to this new government?*

I am not saying this for the sake of form or in a light-hearted manner: I will give it as many as four years and I have solid reasons for giving four years to this government. The Congress and the United Front have both learnt from the experience of the last 10 months – neither of us will again commit the mistake of indulging in brinkmanship.

*On the contrary, the impression is that this government seems less convincing than the previous one when the 13-party coalition came into being and the UF was constituted – there was a general euphoria in political circles and in the country as a whole. Everybody thought that an era of coalitions had begun in India. And, therefore this new experiment would probably last for 2-3 years if not its full term and that it would be good for the country. But, the experiment having failed, it appears that people are not convinced about the bonafides of this new avatar.*

First, I'd like to differ with you. There was no euphoria when the Deve Gowda government was sworn in – nobody gave it 10 months. Second, the failure of the Deve Gowda government or the fall of the Deve Gowda government has not falsified the validity of coalitions. It has been succeeded by another coalition, which only goes to establish the fact that there is no escape from coalition politics in the current phase. In my view coalition governments per se are not inferior in any way to single-party governments. If single party governments could deliver the goods, India would be in a much better state than it is today. After all, the only thing free India has not suffered from is political

instability. If political stability can bring about speedier growth rates, greater justice – then India would have been a much better place to live in. We, in India, suffer from a Britain-centric view. We have not examined the post-War history of Western Europe. In the last fifty years, every major country of Western Europe has seen coalition governments – Germany, France, the Scandinavian countries, Italy and elsewhere. Therefore, to say that the coalition government experiment has failed would be wrong.

*No, I am not arguing against coalition governments per se or the experiment of coalitions. Today, after all there is a political compulsion to enter into coalitions because no single political party is in a position to form a government. The argument is about the fragility of this particular experiment.*

It is not fragile. It was the first experiment of its kind. Look at the anxiety that gripped the Congress party which withdrew support even before Deve Gowda went in for the vote of confidence, and which he lost. Look at the concern caused in the UF which instead of getting divided as people feared got its act together in a remarkable way. The Third Force, which is manifesting itself in the form of the UF has improved on its past record. In 1979, the Janata Party was divided. In 1990, the Janata Dal was divided. The UF did not get divided, it has remained united like a sheet-rock. This is why the UF was able to form a government with only a change of guard at the top. I don't consider it very pleasant, but we had to make the sacrifice. Our government continues.

*Do you agree with the view that we have to learn to live with coalitions. But, as of now, we are not prepared. We don't have a mindset as we have never had a proper coalition government in the country. Therefore, it will take a long gestation period.*

I agree with you. Whether it is Congress, BJP or the Janata Dal, we were never philosophically or psychologically prepared for a coalition. Take the BJP, which now claims to have emerged as a frontrunner in the country. It has entered into an awkward coalition arrangement in Lucknow. It is forced to put up with all kinds of insults

heaped on it day in and day out by Bal Thackeray. So people are learning to live with the fact of coalitions.

*Are you implying that coalition governments in India are not ideological in nature?*

They are ideological. I do not say they are not.

*No, because you said that the BJP was opportunistic in entering into a coalition with the BSP in Uttar Pradesh. Certainly, you imply it was not ideological in nature.*

I am not saying that just by entering into an alliance with the BSP it has ceased to be ideological. I don't want to jump to a conclusion just because I am a critic of the BJP. It was a clever strategy on their part. But, I am sure the strategy will not only misfire, it will backfire. I am sure BSP will never pass on the baton to the BJP. If BJP thinks the BSP is going to pass on the baton, it is living in a fool's paradise. But, then, they are experimenting.

*We'll come to the BJP later. Coming back to the UF and this coalition experiment headed by I.K. Gujral, don't you feel it is too brittle? At the outset, it was not a very cohesive whole. But, in the second instance, with the TMC deciding to keep out of the government, it has exposed the brittle nature of the coalition?\**

You see, it is not a new coalition, it is not a new front, it is not a new formation. Since 1990, we have been functioning as one formation, under one title or another. Between 1991 and 1996 we worked together as the National Front-Left combine. In 1996 we became the United Front. The TMC's withdrawal is temporary. I am certain the TMC will return. Moopanar is in the UF. The TMC is only keeping out of the government; it has not withdrawn from the UF. So the TMC will return to the government and Chidambaram will be back as finance minister. I have no doubt on that count. And the UF is today viewed as a formation which was not the case earlier. Today, you have three major formations – the Congress, the BJP and the United Front. The UF has come to be distinguished for certain ideological traits: (a) for laying greater emphasis on the federal character of the Indian polity; (b) for strengthening the secular character of Indian society; (c) for trying to do justice to sections, classes and castes which have been hitherto neglected; (d) while doing all this, we have been pragmatic in our economic approach – we have not been doctrinaire; and (e) we have given a scam-free government. I wouldn't say corruption-free because corruption is to some extent prevalent at every level in our system.

*But, 10 months is too short a time for the people to judge whether it was scam-free or not.*

I agree, but during the 10 months we took many initiatives. The budget was widely welcomed. The foreign

policy initiatives taken by Gujral as foreign minister were welcomed, not only in the Indian sub-continent but all over the world. These are no mean achievements.

*Let's talk about the withdrawal of the TMC. We may agree that the TMC may come back, but perhaps an answer to this question can also throw some light on the nature of coalitions in India. Why do you think the TMC withdrew?*

The TMC felt, as explained to us, that its loyalty to the UF was somehow suspect.

*By whom?*

By some parts of the UF or remaining constituents of the UF. I think this is a case of misperception on the part of TMC. I think the decision was taken to select a leader from the North because we have to meet the challenge of the BJP in north India. It was not a case of lack of trust in the political standing or sincerity of a stalwart like Moopanar – it is just a case of misunderstanding.

*There seems to be a paradox in all this. At one level, this coalition is dependent on Congress support from outside. At another, Moopanar's loyalty and commitment to the UF was questioned perceptibly because of his proximity to the Congress, or proximity to Sonia Gandhi, but essentially the Congress. It is said that Moopanar is quintessentially a Congressman. Here is a person who has Congress as his background, and you doubt him and don't want to be lead by him?*

This is all a misperception on the part of the media. Nobody suspected the integrity of TMC or the commitment of Moopanar to the UF experiment. Just because people did not reach a consensus in his favour does not amount to a lack of trust. There were many others also who ran – they can also argue on those lines. As for attachment to the Congress, am I not an ex-Congressman? Is not Deve Gowda an ex-Congressman? Is not I.K. Gujral an ex-Congressman? All of us were born in the Congress party. We left the Congress under different circumstances for what we considered powerful, ideological and moral reasons. Therefore, proximity to the Congress party is not a disqualification. So far as Sonajji is concerned, she has gracefully kept away from politics. I don't think it will be fair to drag in her name at all. Her name never figured in all our talks or negotiations.

*In last fortnight's drama, time and again it appeared that Moopanar is closer to the Congress, that Sitaram Kesri would accept Moopanar and nobody else. Why, because Moopanar has been a quintessential Congressperson?*

Kesri, to be fair to him, may have made any other mistake but he did not prefer anyone within the UF. His condition or conditionality was purely negative. He had some prejudice against Deve Gowda; he had some unpleasant misunderstanding with him. He said you choose anybody other than Deve Gowda. When Gujral was chosen, he

\* This interview was recorded before the TMC rejoined the government.

(Kesri) was just as happy as would have been in the case of Moopanar. It is not correct to say that Kesri sought to influence the choice of leader of the UF at all,

*Are you saying this to ensure Congress is not displeased at this point of time?*

No, I have had the opportunity of interacting with him during the crisis. In fact, before the last letter was delivered to the Rashtrapati, I was at his house. So I had occasion not only to talk to him, but to study him. He was absolutely clear that he was not interested in influencing the choice of the UF and the UF made it clear – I as spokesman made it clear – time and again that the UF would choose its own leader. It would not, in any case, be influenced by anybody from outside.

*There is a difference between the election of Deve Gowda as leader of the UF 10 months ago and Gujral's election today and also in the attitude of the Congress party towards these two leaders and the UF. Today, Congress leaders are clearly saying that they won't like to have a leader at the helm of the UF as prime minister, who has, as they put it, an anti-Congress bent of mind.*

These are all words – these are all labels. I was born in the Congress party. I was an MLA of the party twice. I was general secretary of the PCC in Andhra Pradesh way back in 1969. Do I suffer from an anti-Congress mindset? The Congress must also try to retrieve a part of its heritage of Gandhi and Nehru that it has lost in recent years and decades. That's a question for the Congress party to address. So far as our leaders are concerned – I am not talking about the left parties or the regional parties – the Janata Dal does not suffer from an anti-Congress mindset. When Deve Gowda was chosen leader, he was heartily welcomed by the Congress President, Narasimha Rao. Narasimha Rao was, and is, quintessentially a Congressman. When Gujral was chosen, Kesri appeared to be entirely happy. Therefore, it is more a question of an equation of the Congress president with the chosen leader, than about the mindset of the leader.

*That was not my contention. It appears that 10 months ago, the Congress could not care less about who the UF would select as its leader. But today, they say, certain people are acceptable to us and certain people are not acceptable to us.*

May I tell you, after all, the Congress party has one virtue – it has one power centre. It may have many other weaknesses, but it is noted for its culture of conformity, compliance and discipline. It is represented by the Congress president. I don't consider remarks made by the other leaders. The Congress President Sitaram Kesri was categorical – you choose anybody other than Deve Gowda. They were happy to welcome Jyoti Basu, who has never spent a day in his 60 year-long career without criticising the Congress. Yet, they were prepared to welcome him as prime minister of India. It's another matter that Jyoti Basu was not in a

position to offer his services on account of the position taken by his party.

*Are you saying they were prepared to accept Jyoti Basu as prime minister of India with their support from outside?*

Yes

*Was it discussed in the UF or outside?*

No, Kesri told us categorically that he had no objection to whoever is chosen. And it was stated categorically in both letters given to us, in the talks held with us, in the letter given to the Rashtrapati, in the speeches made in Parliament that they would accept anybody other than Deve Gowda. Deve Gowda was heartily welcomed by Narasimha Rao. After a change in the Congress president, there was a change in the attitude towards Deve Gowda. But he was never, never, accused of anti-Congressism as such.

*But, that brings us to a question which remains a mystery. What problems did Kesri or the Congress have with Deve Gowda? Why did they withdraw support?*

Firstly, apart from misunderstanding – I shouldn't be speaking so frankly as an official spokesman – my United Front is still receiving ungrudging support from the Congress party. Apart from misunderstanding, there was also some miscalculation about the dynamics of withdrawal of support.

*Miscalculation on the part of Kesri?*

On the part of the Congress leadership, I should say. After all, Kesri did not take the decision himself. The whole leadership was involved. It's clear from the fact that the entire leadership endorsed his decision. So there was some misunderstanding.

*What was the misunderstanding? It is not clear what the problems were?*

I also don't know. But, from the kind of pique they gave expression to against Deve Gowda, it can only be considered a misunderstanding.

*Could it be something personal?*

Well, I don't know and I can't say, because I need authentic information. There was a case of misunderstanding, but apart from that – I would like to repeat and reiterate – it was a case of miscalculation. What that miscalculation was is for the Congress leadership to reflect upon.

*What was the miscalculation? Did they think they could form a government if Deve Gowda was made to resign?*

No, the miscalculation could have been about the ability of the UF to keep itself together. To everybody's surprise, the UF pulled together, got its act together, remained united – not only until the vote of confidence but even after it lost the vote of confidence.

*So it appears there was a double game being played on both sides. The Congress thought Deve Gowda was trying to break the party, and Deve Gowda till the last minute was hoping the Congress would split.*

I am not saying the Congress was trying to break the UF. Did I say that? They may have underestimated the factors that unified the UF. They must have overestimated the fragility or the brittleness of the UF. The UF turned out to be far less fragile than anybody thought it was.

*No, I'm referring to the mistrust and suspicion on both sides. The Congress thought, or Kesri thought, at least that's the reason he gave out, that Deve Gowda was trying to break the Congress—and Congress was estimating that if support was withdrawn, the UF would split.*

That could have been the calculation of the Congress party. So far as we were concerned, we were very clear. The traditions of Congress have been such that it could not be split. It did not split in 1969 nor in 1978 and those who broke away from mainstream Congress suffered so much that Congressmen in general are averse to splits. We knew this, and I think Deve Gowda knew this as well. So there was no such attempt on his part. But, then Deve Gowda was in touch with all the leaders of the Congress party for the simple reason that it was a major party—140-strong. They have a number of stalwarts in their ranks. He couldn't just simply refuse to interact with them. This could have been misunderstood by the Congress party.

*But, there was a section of the UF leadership who possibly thought the Congress would split under pressure....*

No. After all, Deve Gowda was the leader of the UF. He did not think so. He told us that Congressmen could do anything, but they will not split. And it's not correct to say Deve Gowda neglected Kesri; that Deve Gowda met Narasimha Rao a number of times to interact with him and he didn't show similar courtesy to Kesri. He met Kesri 12 times but the chemistry between them, for some reasons, did not work. Their relationship was characterised by a miasma of mistrust, mutual mistrust. Therefore, this came about.

*It didn't work because in the beginning Deve Gowda was too dependent on the influence of Narasimha Rao within the party and once Rao had to leave, he could not think or could not bring himself to adjust to the new....*

No. Deve Gowda, right from the day when Sitaram Kesri replaced Narasimha Rao kept seeing Kesri. And senior leaders like H.S. Surjeet, who has an excellent rapport with Kesri, tried to weave silken bonds between Deve Gowda and Kesri. A lot of Congressmen tried to build bridges between the two. But for some reason, it didn't work. But the UF's experiment is working. Don't bother about a change of guard at the top. The government is the same, the ministry is the same, their portfolios are the same and yet we

won the vote of confidence. The BJP remains as isolated as before. The BJP's gameplan was that it would be able to win over, or wean away, the regional parties. It couldn't win over a single minor party from the UF.

*Mr. Reddy, you talked about the Congress tradition that it has never split under pressure from outside. At the same time, there is a tradition of the Congress that we've known since 1979, that they pulled the rug from under non-Congress leaders who formed a government with their support. It happened in 1979 with Charan Singh, it happened with Chandra Shekhar in 1991. And it has happened again this time with Deve Gowda. Is there a guarantee it won't happen again in the near future?*

The historical conditions have changed. In 1979, when Indira Gandhi did it (split the Congress), she went back to the people. She had lost in the people's court in 1977, she therefore went to the people's court to come back in 1980. In 1991, Rajiv Gandhi led the single biggest contingent in the Lok Sabha with 191 members. He too went back to the people's court. This time though, the Congress party might have done it for the right or wrong reasons, they did not think of going to the people's court because the balance of forces has changed drastically. The Congress has been badly affected in three major states—U.P., Bihar and Tamil Nadu. These three states alone account for 179 Lok Sabha seats in a house of 545. That is, in one-third of the country it has nearly been wiped out.

*So it is necessary for the Congress to support the UF at this point of time. Is it compulsion or political expediency or something ideological?*

I must say, if it is only political expediency they could also have supported the BJP. I must be fair to the Congress party. I think it is more an ideological compulsion rather than political expediency. The credit must be given to the Congress for resisting the temptation and lending support to the UF.

*Some Congress leaders did refer to the anti-Congressism being practised by some UF leaders?*

You see, there are many people in the UF like me who left the Congress party in the wake of the Emergency. I am sure those who are still in the Congress party could not be proud of what happened during the heyday of the Emergency. So, therefore, those who opposed Emergency and its consequences cannot be accused of harbouring an anti-Congress mindset. In fact, such of us who are there in the UF, who were earlier in the Congress, are for the restoration of the original ideology of the Congress party. We are not opposed to Congress ideology. We believe the Congress, in the last two decades, and more so in recent years, has strayed from its original ideology. Therefore, we can recall, and those who are in the Congress now can recall, the Congress divisions.



*Do you think the present bonhomie between the UF and the Congress could lead to some electoral adjustments or alliances in the next elections?*

As an official spokesman of the UF, I cannot express my personal view. But, the UF has not so far thought on those lines. As for anti-Congressism, let me tell you I was the spokesman for the National Front and Janata Dal in 1990-91 and I categorically denied that anti-Congressism was relevant any longer. So did Mulayam Singh Yadav. He said in the debate on 22 April, that anti-Congressism is no longer relevant. After all, those of us that embraced Jayaprakash Narayan and Lohia's ideology cannot be labeled anti-Congress because with the exception of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel, I don't think any Congressman was taller than JP and Lohia.

*One of the major problems which everybody foresees, and which has also surfaced in the present turmoil is that the Congress and some sections of the UF – that is, the regional parties – are rivals in the states. It is their political compulsion to fight each other in the state and, at the same time, cooperate at the Centre. How will you tackle or manage this contradiction?*

This problem has been with us since 1991. If the regional parties having federal aspirations and catering to regional aspirations are not co-opted by us, you leave the space to the BJP. Today, the BJP is near totally absent in south India and in eastern India. It is there only in north and western India. The regional parties need their own secular space because they are primarily secular parties. You cannot expect DMK, TDP to become communal parties. By asking them to adjust with the Congress at the local level, you would be either driving them to the BJP camp. Such a scenario is absolutely undesirable from the viewpoint of secularism.

*That is a problem. The point, then, is how regional parties like the DMK, TDP, AGP will adjust with the Congress?*

What is politics meant for? The art of politics consists in successfully managing contradictions for a larger social, political, ideological purpose.

*But do you think this can go on over a long time?*

Why not. It went on for 10 months and we have entered into the second phase of the same government. I don't call it the second government at all, I call it the UF government.

*Let's say, there is an election in Andhra Pradesh – your own state. Do you think there is a possibility – or, what will be the atmosphere between the Congress and the TDP?*

One of confrontation, and rightly so.

*Don't you think it will have its impact at the Centre?*

It will, it will not. If the Congress and TDP come together only for secular reasons, then all those who are

opposed to either of them will be compelled to join the BJP camp. You will be creating a political space in south and eastern India for the BJP. Take, for example, West Bengal: If the CPM and the Congress cooperate, the BJP will emerge as an alternative to both the Congress and CPM. The same thing is happening in Kerala.

*There is one telling example from Uttar Pradesh. The state went to the polls after the Lok Sabha elections. Even though the UF and Congress were cooperating with each other at the Centre, they did not cooperate in U.P., with the result that the BJP emerged as the single largest party.*

As V.P. Singh pointed out in one of his public pronouncements, the picture in north and western India is very different from that in south and eastern India. In the North and West, the BJP has emerged as a major force – so all the non-BJP forces should get their act together here. But, the same thing cannot be applied or followed as a strategy in eastern and southern India. In which case, you would create a new and vast space for the BJP where it is politically non-existent. So in a vast country like India you can't adopt one strategy. The strategy has to be variegated, differentiated to deal with the problems.

*Just as it continues to be unclear as to why Sitaram Kesri withdrew support, in the same way the UF took a fortnight to decide upon a leader. There were so many people in the race. It still remains a mystery as to what went on behind the scenes. Why was there a fight over the leadership issue?*

Once again you are wrong. Until we allowed the process to be taken to its logical end of voting in the house, we did not search for a successor. Ten months ago we chose leader in two hours. This time we took two days and formed the government in 12 hours.

*I think Chandra Babu Naidu had to be in Andhra Bhavan for 10 days consecutively....*

He went to Andhra and came back. Between 30 March and 11 April, our strategy was to keep the UF together in which we succeeded. Thereafter, our effort was to form a cabinet which would convey a signal, a powerful signal of political continuity. In this too, we succeeded.

*Lastly, everybody said after Gujral's selection that he was not the first choice of any section, any party constituent of the UF, but the second choice.*

The point is, he is a consensus candidate. In a situation of this kind what operates is a process of elimination. It is not the vote that counts. It is the veto that counts. There was no party, minor or major, which had a complaint against Gujral, and which exercised its veto against Gujral. We didn't have a taller person in our ranks, we didn't have another person with richer, wider experience, exposure and wisdom.

# What ails the Congress?

V.N. Gadgil speaks to Rajdeep Sardesai

THE Congress party is still desperately searching for its Gorbachev. V.N. Gadgil would hardly seem to be the man to usher in perestroika and glasnost in the Congress. At the age of 68, Gadgil's best political days seem to be behind him (of course, age has little to do with political mobility as Sitaram Kesri and Inder Gujral would readily testify). Gadgil did not contest the last general elections from Pune, a seat that went instead to Suresh Kalmadi, the impressario turned MP. Indeed, the switch-over from Gadgil to Kalmadi is itself symptomatic of the politics of the new age, where value-based leadership is sacrificed at the altar of manipulative politics.

Again, as Congress spokesperson, it has been Gadgil's job over the last few years to defend the seemingly indefensible. And yet, he's done his job well, masking for the most part the reality of a party in decline. But Gadgil is by natural inclination a free thinker. In this interview, Gadgil shared his views on what has gone wrong with the party of the freedom movement and what could be done by the Congress to revive itself.

*Would you agree that the Congress is in a state of terminal decline?*

I wouldn't come to such a grand conclusion. I think the trouble in the Congress started much earlier than most people imagine. The 1952-57-61 elections were won in the afterglow of the Independence movement with Jawaharlal Nehru as our leader. From 1964 onwards, things changed. New social forces emerged. Also, the concept of non-Congressism, or anti-Congressism developed. The result was that in 1967, we lost power in eight states. This erosion of Congress support would have continued but for the leadership of Indira Gandhi. She was able to electrify the nation with her Garibi Hatao slogan and she saved the Congress. That process continued till 1977. We were able to return to power in 1980 only because of the non-performance of the Janata Party. In 1984, we won an election which was totally abnormal because of the martyrdom of Indira Gandhi. If she

had not been assassinated, I doubt the Congress would have got such a majority. So, the decline started much earlier than most imagine, and only got postponed.

*What explains the decline?*

Well, first, there was the awakening of the new social forces who felt that they had no place in the Congress. It started with the dalits, later on the backwards also became disenchanted. Second, the concept of non-Congressism became well-entrenched. Third, I must admit that while the Congress did make an attempt to change with the times it did not succeed in three respects. First, the Congress should have developed a distinct ideology and a new leadership. After Indira Gandhi and Rajiv to an extent, there was no charismatic leader who could attract the masses; nor was there any concept of collective leadership. Second, we failed to give a programme, particularly one that would attract the younger generation. Finally, we totally failed to project and communicate our achievements to the voter, especially the younger voter in the 18 to 25 age group.

*Do you sense any desire within the Congress to adjust to the new realities, to see itself as a party that is able to attract a generation that didn't grow up in the freedom movement?*

For a voter in the 18 to 25 age group, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru or even Indira Gandhi, are just textbook figures. So, we must modernise and articulate the aspirations of the younger people. If we go on talking parrot-like about socialism and secularism or non-alignment, it will have no impact. This does not appeal to the younger voter. We must find out what the young people want, and change ourselves accordingly.

*But is it possible to change the Congress? This is, after all, a 112 year-old party where certain traditions have been well-established.*

I still think the Congress is capable of transforming itself, but at the moment there is still no leader who is capable of spearheading the process of modernising and revitalising the Congress. The Congress can be revived if we find a

dynamic leadership. Second, we have to revive certain traditions. This nominated culture and parachuted leadership must go, which is why the organisational elections are so important. I agree that the elections are not perfect, but at least they will throw up an elected leadership. We also must have a brain-storming session to analyse how we can modernise ourselves. We need to have a training camp for our workers so that Congressmen who are good communicators can reach out to the people. Finally, in every district, we must have regular political training camps.

*Many of these suggestions have been made before, but little seems to really happen. Do you think that Congressmen are so obsessed with the pursuit of power that they have little time for any real reform?*

Yes, that is partly true. We are too obsessed with power. 1967 was a watershed in this regard. Until that time, the Congress mainly had those [members] who may not have been freedom-fighters but had been brought up in that era. There was a sense of values and ideological commitment. After 1967, what I see is that there are hardly any values left, and there is no ideological commitment. It is all power-oriented. The Congress has become a party of power with very little values.

*You spoke earlier of the need for a charismatic leader. Do you feel that Sonia Gandhi could be that type of a charismatic leader?*

Well, my intellectual friends may not like it, but I have always been one of those who has supported Sonia's entry into politics. I feel that she is the kind of leader who could galvanise the rank and file of the party. Her very presence could electrify the masses.

*But what is her appeal to the average Congressmen besides being the widow of Rajiv Gandhi?*

She is a representative of a family with which the Congress identifies itself. There is no point talking of dynastic politics here. The family tradition in Indian politics and, indeed, world politics is a reality. In the West too, you have the Churchills and the Kennedys. I feel though that she should start off as a member of the Congress Working Committee, so that she gets some experience in the party's functioning.

*Lets talk of the nomination culture. Why is that so deeply entrenched?*

Well, there are vested interests who fear that they will be displaced and so they have resisted organisational elections. They always have.

58

*Do you think that organisational elections will democratise the party?*

Well, as I said earlier, organisational elections may not be perfect, but they will certainly help.

*What about the Congress high command culture which breeds this extreme sycophancy? Other party's seem to be much more decentralised. Didn't this process start with the Gandhi family?*

You see, there is another view to this whole issue. This view is that the Congress is the only party which holds the country together. And when your polity is federal, your party is unitary, because if power is distributed between the Centre and the states, and a similar distribution takes place in an organisation, then what will hold the country together? Just look at what decentralised leadership has done to the Janata Dal. So, I am not against a high command culture.

*One area which we haven't touched upon yet is the Congress vision of secularism and what impact this has had on the party. Would you agree that this needs re-evaluation?*

There is no need to reconsider secularism as such, but the contents of secularism have to be examined. We can't say that being secular means that you will not be allowed to break a coconut at a gathering. All communities in the country are religious and the Congress has to recognise the implications of this. The Congress vision of secularism must be much clearer and concise: we should limit it to the separation of religion from politics and not use religion for electoral ends.

*You then do accept that distortions have crept into the Congress vision of secularism?*

Yes, and as a result we have alienated sections of Muslims and Hindus. I mean in a country where Muslims are 12 per cent of the population, just two per cent are in the central services. We must ensure that Muslims get the educational facilities to be partners in progress. Its not a question of reservation or appeasement but of education.

*You then believe that Muslims will return to the Congress fold despite Babri Masjid?*

Yes, I do, but for that we need to launch a massive educational campaign which we haven't done so far. We need to launch a similar educational campaign among the dalits too. These groups must know that the Congress even now represents their interests.

*There is also a feeling that if the Congress has to return to power it must come to terms with coalition politics. Do you agree?*

No, I don't. I don't believe we have entered the era of coalition politics. For that, I would like to wait for another couple of election results. But I don't feel that the Congress needs to adjust with regional parties. Regional parties are a passing phenomenon. Coalitions have to be forged with social groups, not with regional parties.

# Books

**INDIA'S NEED FOR STRATEGIC BALANCE:**  
**Security in the Post-Cold War World** by Lt Gen  
V.R. Raghavan. Delhi Policy Group, New Delhi, 1996.

**SOCIETIES AND MILITARY POWER: India and Its  
Armies** by Stephen Peter Rosen. Oxford University  
Press, Delhi, 1996.

THE Delhi Policy Group (DPG) – an association of mostly retired civilian and military folk constituted as a think-tank – is a promising concept. But, on the strength of its first offering, it is yet to pan out.

The problems with India's *Need for Strategic Balance* are many. But let's start with the superficial – the packaging. A book is a book and an essay only an essay. To try to sell an essay, albeit pumped all the way up to 70 pages as a book (priced at a hefty Rs 350), however this is contrived – extra-large print-size suitable for the vision-impaired, double-spacing of lines, and featuring of just one narrow column of staggered text to a page – is to indulge in the literary equivalent of the standard practice of the victuals suppliers to the army. They are known to force-feed tons of water to the skeletal 'meat on the hoof' just so the wretched creatures bloat up and tilt the scales at the time of sale! But is there intellectual nourishment to compensate? Alas, like the poor jawan who searches for mutton only to find bone and gristle, the reader too may be left unsatisfied!

To begin with, the title. The Strategic Balance in it refers, as it turns out, not to a balanced force-structure nor to a balance between conventional and nuclear forces, and not even to the balancing of threats, but rather to the lack of an integrated or, as Raghavan calls it, 'holistic' national security policy! (This, by the way, is about the level of originality of insights in this longish article.)

K. Shankar Bajpai, a former Indian Ambassador to the United States and Chairman of the DPG, in the 'Foreword' which here is labelled 'Introduction' (incorrectly, methinks, because traditionally this is penned by the author or the editor of the book and contains a summary of the arguments made and of conclusions reached), promises one thing only to have the author deliver the near opposite. Thus, expectations are raised that the monograph will refute the 'economic specialists' who, Bajpai claims, are unfamiliar 'with the ways of the world' and who, therefore, mindlessly parrot the theme of reduced defence expenditures.

The General, one of the directors of the DPG, delivers at best at a tangent to this theme. He champions the line that considering the paucity of resources, the growing belief that national security is more than just military security, and the fact that the threat environment 'has improved to a one front [Pakistan] scenario' (p.53), the need, in his words, is for according 'a higher priority to the non-military dimensions of security.' What this prescription, in effect, boils down to is a policy of benign neglect of the military!

Such iconoclasm by a well-regarded armyman would be welcome breeze blowing through musty military corridors, were he able to carry an argument as well. This General Raghavan seems incapable of doing. When he is not espousing by now commonplace views, he is, oftener than not, contradicting himself and compounding his own confusion. Thus, on page 32 he talks about force levels being based 'on assessments that did not take into account the economic potential needed to sustain them over long periods,' implying wrong force structuring decisions in the past. And, on the very next page, he concludes not only that the country has over the years successfully balanced defence and development, but that the 'growth of the armed forces required by the confrontations forced upon India' by Pakistan and China 'succeeded impressively,' implying that the extant conventional force levels and force design are appropriate after all! Things being this hunky dory, where's the need to rethink the current defence policies?

Again, on nuclear matters, he shows himself a muddled anti-nuclearist. India, writes Raghavan, has 'an opportunity to create a viable nuclear space, relative to its needs of a large state, progressing towards becoming a substantial power' (p.26). Ah, weaponisation! thinks you ere your eyes alight a few, short sentences later, on this: 'India's answer for balance in its strategic framework is ...very unlikely to be found in a weaponised nuclear capability.'

Consistently confused thinking is still consistency of sorts, I suppose. But is it virtue? Perhaps not. However, it bespeaks the lack of clarity of thought as earlier indicated. This is seen early on in the essayist's standing political developments on their head and reversing cause and effect by, for example, attributing the 'militarisation of politics' in the country to the increase in the 'state's ability to put down dissent' (p.12). It is impossible thereafter to take the former Director-General of Military Operations seriously.

If Raghavan's expostulation weren't enough to set the teeth on edge, certain other aspects, like the way the footnotes are conceived, just might. They are so terse and truncated, for reasons of style one suspects – e.g., 'Walter Lippman: US Foreign Policy, Shield of the Republic, 1943', with nary a mention of the publisher's name or of the city it is published from – that the relatively simple task of tracing a reference to its source becomes a chore.

It is a relief to turn to traditional scholarship on a related subject. (Here, the reviewer concedes the unfairness in coupling these books for review; the two being in quite different leagues. But, hey, *C'ela vie!*) Stephen Peter Rosen's study exudes *gravitas* and is profound in its insights. The leitmotif of this book is the significant and, by and large, correct historical analogy that the author draws between the Indian Army, past and present, and the military of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

More importantly, Rosen in his book fleshes out a variant even as he refutes some aspects of the orthodox academic view (featured in the writings of Samuel Huntington and his ilk) much in vogue in the '50s and '60s that militaries everywhere are culturally 'progressive' and otherwise divorced from the particular national milieus they are rooted in and that, whatever their apparent differences, they are, in fact, more alike in their values and mindsets and similar to other agencies of a modern Weberian state in their disposition to carry out secular functions of nation-building, and so on.

His rich sociological analysis is in one sense a reconstituted one, exploring themes earlier examined by Indian historians of repute like Sir Jadunath Sarkar. But it is unique in that he weaves into the analysis, both by way of juxtaposition and by way of their subsequent influence on Indian military thinking and structures, the nuances in the Macedonian, Ottoman, Afghan and Mongol, European and even Hannibal's military organisation and modes of warfighting. The argument goes something like this.

India, like the Hapsburg Raj in pre-World War One Central Europe and the Balkans, is a conglomeration of ethnic, linguistic and religious groupings held together fist-by-jowl by feelings, however tenuous, of a shared past, common societal strands and of nationhood. The organisation of the armed forces of such a crazy-quilt state, consequently, reflects the social reality of sometimes uneasy, but generally accommodative, relations between distinct and diverse communities, identities and cultures.

The *jati*, i.e., caste, is and always has been the great constant of the subcontinental society and, therefore, of such polities as have existed here. The endogamous nature of these discrete and well-entrenched castes and sub-castes which cut across religious lines, was at once a boon in that it provided the larger social superstructure continuity over time, even as it permitted the bulk of the population residing in the countryside as elsewhere with channels for social intercourse and with means of facilitating inter-dependence.

It survived repeated invasions and rule by outsiders who prudently accepted the social structure as a given and did not fiddle with it. Equally, caste consciousness in Indian society has acted as a bane in that it has prevented the growth of a sense of solidarity among the people even when faced by dire external threats.

What it has meant in military terms is that the army structured along the lines of neatly compartmentalised fighting arms based on caste affinities, rarely cooperated and helped each other on the battlefield and almost never fought an enemy to the last – the various elements in it preferring, frequently in the midst of battle, to cut their separate peace when the going got tough. Worse, this also meant that Indian armies while impressive to look at – the sight of Porus' armoured war elephants, for example, all but scared Alexander the Great's Macedonian phalanx into a rebellion – lacked coordination and not only did not fight to a plan but as a large undisciplined mass of men, engaged in helter-skelter action.

This pattern of behaviour repeated itself so often in history that it may be said to characterise Indian military norm. It was a norm, moreover, that Rosen sources to the ideas about statecraft, like the Hobbesian sounding notion of conflict of all against all, which pre-empted the growth of unity of the Indian peoples and predated Chanakya, but which were collated by him in his *Arthashastra*.

The absence of discipline and social solidarity led to invading armies, manned by more socially cohesive and purposive peoples, enjoying a hefty tactical and strategic advantage when arrayed against native Indian forces even before the first arrow was drawn from the quiver or the initial cannonade ordered. This is evidenced, in recorded history, from the age of Alexander's battles on the Indus in 322 BC, the ingress by a succession of Afghan adventurers, Turkish Sultans and Mongol aggressors into northern India in the medieval era, to more modern times when the British East India Company succeeded in exploiting social divisions within the Indian society to co-opt large sections of the population in their imperial venture and otherwise to defeat Indian kings – too preoccupied with quarrels with neighbours to consider the larger good – in detail.

In Rosen's examination of the social antecedents of the Indian Army, it is clear that the British learnt by trial and error; what worked and what didn't was digested and adjustments quickly made in the way the forces were composed and practices entrenched. This then is what set the British apart from earlier alien rulers of India.

Thus, the domination of caste in the thinking of the Bengal Army was countenanced only because this army proved itself in war, garnering for the Company Bahadur its earliest, quite spectacular, military successes. The caste affiliation was internally sustained because the usually upper caste Bengal Army sepoy did not move his home and hearth to his latest posting as his Bombay Army counterpart did. Familial and community linkages remained organic to the



profession of soldiering. This was so because the Bengal Army sepoy was pulling constabulary duty for the East India Company within his home state of Bihar and Oudh. This is the reason cited by Rosen for the mutiny. Home basing, says Rosen, extrapolating from the Russian soldiers' posting in Warsaw Pact countries in the latter half of this century, sustains discontent better than distant basing because the alien milieu dampens expressions of dissatisfaction and because the normal social support structures available in the home province are missing.

In the socially looser, caste-wise mixed Madras and Bombay (Presidency) Armies, which reflected the fact of the out-sourcing of the sepoys (from Rajputana, Punjab and Oudh), out-of-area deployment of the armies and of the generally egalitarian outlook of the Maratha soldiers, it was the 'pride of regiment' that bound the soldiery together. It is the Bombay Army then that became the model for the post-1857 Indian Army with loyalty to the unit as its cornerstone.

Significantly, the British, again unlike previous alien rulers ensconced in Delhi, never shied from tinkering with class and caste composition of their forces in order to secure a better fighting force. Indeed, social experimentation rode piggyback on and was justified and legitimated by local customs and traditions. Hence, the emergence of the single 'martial class' regiments conforming to the *kshatriya* ideal and the exaltation of the profession of arms per se, rather than of the national entity the armed forces fought for.

The most far-reaching of the social innovations was, as Rosen claims, the British policy of disarming the local population and restricting the carrying of arms only to the Company and later Crown soldiery. This was a radical departure from the ancient Indian reality of armed peasant and *kshatriya* caste members in every village rallying to their king's standard in war or crisis. It at once made armed rebellions difficult and restricted the profession of arms to service only in British forces, thereby endowing such service with prestige.

(The Mughals, it may be recalled, were less bold. Their *mansabdari* system, for instance, was no more than an overlay atop the *ancien* social regime, with the appointment of regional satraps who were required to muster so many cannon, infantry and horse in time of need and who were given *jagirs* to maintain the semi-permanent military secretariats and to facilitate such call-ups.)

Rosen postulates two variables to judge the efficacy of the Indian Army as a fighting force: The nature of Indian social structures and the extent of separation of the military from the society. Talking about the Indian Army after independence, Rosen concludes that the retention of the British system may have helped the army insulate itself from the pushes and pulls of the host Indian society.

Further, man-management being critical to British military successes in the subcontinent, he is of the view, for example, that the narrowly focused ex-British training schedules, while mind-numbing and repetitive, succeed in

distancing the jawan from his milieu and thereby to make him a better fighting asset. Moreover, this strengthens, as do other carefully cultivated factors like Mess and regimental rules and rituals, the self-contained nature of the fighting units. Like in the colonial days, these ensure that the military keeps its cohesion in the context of ongoing turmoil in the society at large.

But the distancing of the Indian Army from the Indian society and the reduction of the military into isolated communities, concludes Rosen most controversially, has also seen to it that the military power of the Indian state has been ineffective. This last fits in with what has eventuated in terms of the reduced presence of India as a military presence in the world.

Bharat Karnad

#### **DALITS AND THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION:**

**Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India** by Gail Omvedt. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1994.

GAIL Omvedt's book sets out to debunk the 'major framework' within which anti-caste movements in colonial India have been interpreted: a framework, she holds, that 'has been highly influenced by the Marxism of the twentieth century.' She castigates equally the view that anti-imperialist nationalism has been 'the overarching movement of the Third World countries in the era of imperialism' (p. 14). Is it, however, a question of wrong Marxist and nationalist assumptions? Would it not have been more meaningful to analyse the agenda for power struggles in colonial India to understand how and why the anti-caste movements, particularly under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership, failed to forge the requisite strategy for their advancement?

In a small section, 'The context of strategy and theory', at the end of the book, Omvedt sums up the failure of Ambedkar to grasp the current agenda without any discussion of its hows and whys. Given the context, she says, of Marxist hegemony on the left, Hindi-Muslim communalism, and Nehruism which ignored caste and local identities, 'the dalit movement under Ambedkar's leadership could only be a passive observer of most major events, at best exerting its minor influence to achieve some gains and concessions' (p. 226). Rather than blaming the bourgeois-brahman Congress and the non-revolutionary communists, a little reflection on the premises and strategy of the Ambedkar movement would have been in order.

A sense of national oppression is not contra-indicated to a sense of social oppression. The axial role is played by ideology which is not only political and economic but also religio-cultural. Ambedkar himself emphasised this when he pointed out to the communists that the religious and social 'superstructure' had as much 'truth' and 'reality' as the economic base (quoted on p. 228). No determinism

works here as Omvedt herself lists the different roles of movements and leaders grouped under the rubric of anti-caste interventions. They show a complexity of perspectives corresponding to their existential location.

It is absurd to speak of the ideological hegemony of Marxism, nationalism, Gandhism or Nehruism as if each were a coercive power imposed on people and not a legitimate ideological persuasion. How does it work? What made substantial groups of the socially oppressed participate in the ideological hegemony of nationalism despite Ambedkar's characterisation of the 'elite-controlled national Congress' as 'bourgeois-brahman'? (p. 250) Ambedkar himself noted that he had tried constantly to dissuade non-brahmans from entering the Congress, but 'they wouldn't listen' (p. 208).

It is perfectly correct to argue that cultural and community forms are channels of subordination, but an analysis of these forms does not require a 'historical materialist theory' howsoever 'revised' it may be. The desire to cling to it is a constraint rather than a help in acquiring insights, as becomes clear from Omvedt's work. The objective of paralleling Leninist analysis to draw political strategy is achieved by Omvedt at the cost of extreme oversimplification of power relations. If, as she says, state power embodies relations of violence and domination, while cultural relations embodied in religious institutions play a 'secondary' role, then why must we conclude that 'the distinction between brahman and non-brahman was a fundamental one, and that peasants, even when they were a dominant caste, were basically a part of the exploited sections' (p. 47).

The conclusion, in my view, is correct, though nothing in the old historical materialist paradigm to which Omvedt remains faithful leads up to it. The major non-brahman peasant *jatis* historically became powerful as wielders of politico-military power which then translated into economic power. However, this material power did not suffice to create a holistic resource of legitimacy until the cultural-ideological legitimisation conferred by brahmins was in place. This legitimisation was often sought by the powerful lord or raja and was as often offered by willing brahmins who sought to liaise with successful military and political authority. (See Herman Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*, Manohar, 1993). Only by recognising the primary function of cultural and ideological hierarchies in establishing relations of power, can one explain the fact that dalits were fundamentally differentiated from others as 'impure', thus 'untouchable', and that within the internal hierarchy of the 'exploited' they were at the bottom (p. 48).

The paradoxical acknowledgment that caste has 'a retarding effect on class struggle' when combined with the insistence on forging a 'revolutionary strategy within the historical-materialist paradigm' creates a major contradiction in Omvedt's book. Lenin's *What is to be Done?* gets

strangely mixed up with the basic questions that are confronted by all students of Indian social and cultural history. What made the caste system – *jati vyavastha* – an intrinsic part of the world-view and way of life of the exploited as much as that of the exploiters? Why was the range of hierarchic castes within the toiling and oppressed acceptable and internalised as part of the power relations in society? Why did movements for a reordering of power relations in society such as the Buddhist and Jain ideological interventions, not lead to a systemic large scale revolt and radical rupture. Why, instead, did they function like a slow molecular transformative societal force, often receiving royal and political patronage? How should one grasp the nature of these equalitarian movements which modified the pre-existing matrix of power to a degree and compelled the dominant cultural castes and discourses to accommodate them? Can the ensuing results be seriously taken as the great medieval synthesis? Can we accept this pattern as the specific Indic manner of moving towards an expanding societal order in which the nucleus of power does not jump out from the centre to the periphery but only metamorphoses in time and space? Can one – howsoever unevenly – conceptualise a map of shifting hierarchies and equilibriums in society where the relation between the power nucleus and the hierarchic points in relation to it establish a dialectic of sorts?

Omvedt dips her fingers into this stream of enquiry, only to quickly abandon it and get back to her pre-conceived assumption. According to her, Buddhism and Jainism had 'limitations' because they could not be linked to a more productive historical system and were thus 'defeated'. After their defeat 'only a negative rebellion' was possible, as 'represented by the *bhakti* cults which embodied aspirations to equality but accepted a Hindu framework for this worldly social interaction' (p. 9). Why was a 'Hindu framework' acceptable or desirable to the *bhakti* cults and did they thereby represent only a negative protest?

Omvedt indicts the national leadership for dividing the movement into two – a political movement and a social movement. The fact was that the two processes of political liberation and social reform did often contradict each other's priorities and the strategy of separating them was a conscious one. Without any evaluation of the nationalist strategy, Omvedt takes recourse to casting aspersions on nationalist leaders. For instance, Tilak is accused of defending landlordism regardless of the context in which he stood by the landlords and *sowcars* against colonial intervention. When the Congress launched anti-moneylender and anti-landlord agitations in many places, and legislated against them when it formed ministries after 1937, Omvedt squares the circle by remarking: 'At the same time, the "brahmanic" interests of the elite, particularly as against "bania" traditions, were consistent with a certain degree of anti-capitalism, demands for nationalisation and the fostering of a state-controlled economy' (p. 90).

Thus, the nationalist leadership was both capitalist and anti-capitalist, for reform and against reform. Must one not examine this duality in its discourse and practice? Ambiguity and duality, however, is anathema for Omvedt who employs the clarity of binary opposites. Reform or revolution – that is her position. Can we today valorise revolution, which too is equally prone to bring about inequality, injustice and coercive power in its wake? Social groups, classes, even entire societies and nations have sought to push either reform or revolution in human history. They will continue to do so as long as relations of power exist. But which course one wishes to plunge into represents an existential and contingent choice, and is not a matter of social science enquiry with facts that vindicate and justify one's choice.

In my view it is perfectly correct to argue, as Omvedt does, that 'the dominant elite ideological trend by the end of the 19th century was that of a revitalised Hinduism equated with nationalism' (p. 91). However, as against Omvedt's conviction that this statement is sufficient to convict and damn the nationalist elite, I would maintain an equally strong conviction: the mass following of the elite leaders before independence and the enfranchised and gradually assertive 'toiling castes' including the dalits after 1947, are very much a part of this ideological trend of a revitalised Hinduism. This phenomena is an integral part of the cultural assertion of all varieties and sects of Hinduism. The struggle for political power and social respect, and the symbolic assertion of the dalit versus brahman discourse only seeks to restructure and shift the balance of power relations between castes, a characteristic of the communities of Hinduism.

The paradigm within which dalits seek to assert their dignity and significance is a paradigm of subverting upper caste power and compelling the hegemonic castes into recognising the power of dalits as an organised force and transforming their own political practice and ideological discourses correspondingly. In this struggle, the upper castes can emulate the Ranade prescription of restoring 'vitality and energy to the social organism' by accepting the equalitarian and democratic negotiation of power between castes. An orderly restructuring of society is in this case possible, implying thereby a reformation and re-definition of Hinduism. Omvedt, however, cannot consider this prospect as her assumptions are based on a radical confrontation of bipolar categories.

The re-negotiation of power relations without a civil war situation arising does not imply that no bloody conflicts are possible in sectors and segments of the nation and society. There are caste vigilantes and ideologues who base their concept of revolution on precisely such confrontations. The vigilantes of the upper castes exercise coercive domination and periodically unleash violence on dalits. The emergence of their counterparts amongst dalits are a logical development of such a paradigm of confrontation. However, the general ideological trend of sorting out power imbalances

can follow the alternate strategy of shifting equilibrium and re-negotiation of societal power. This trend has been a strong one in our history and it is this that has been exemplified in the Gandhi-Nehru paradigm of transformation.

Omvedt derides not only 'Nehruvian secularism' and 'Gandhian Ram-raj' but also 'the genuine concern of many early reformers', 'young militants such as Bhagat Singh' and 'the left forces' – all of whom refused to confront 'brahmanism'. There was, she writes, 'no resistance' to the identification of the Indian majority as 'Hindu'. The Congress victory in the 1937 elections 'on a large scale' with the support of the communists, socialists, Royists et. al. is presented almost as a conspiracy against the dalits and minorities (pp. 187, 193).

And yet, at the end of the day, she concludes (p. 97): 'The ability of any political movement among the exploited to create such a broad unity and to take up cultural along with economic issues was to be decisive: in the end it was the Gandhian-led Congress which succeeded in doing so....'

Shashi Joshi

**CURRENT ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS** by S.J.R. Bilgrami. Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, 1997.

PROFESSOR Bilgrami is widely known and respected in India for his work in the field of International Relations (IR). This book is a collection of various papers written between 1967 and 1996 covering a great array of issues – the nature of the current post-cold war global system, disarmament problems, the challenges confronting the UN and the Third World, to more specific assessments of non-alignment and Indian foreign policy. The animating spirit of the volume is very much within the ambit of democracy and development. In the author's normative aspirations for how the world order should be reshaped, these are very much his own fundamental commitments.

In contrast to most political realists who otherwise dominate the academic discipline of IR in this country, the presumed 'exigencies of power' are sought to be balanced by Professor Bilgrami against the 'imperatives of morality'. Among his best chapters are those dealing with the UN concerning the necessity and possibilities of erecting an effective global structure of accepted mediation, wherein the focus is 'less on the inviolability of nations than on the indivisibility of human fate.'

This emphasis on the need to develop shared international norms and values brings the author's conception of realist international politics closer to the English school of Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Adam Watson, Fred Northedge and others. The American school of realism has been partially seduced by the inanities of Waltzian 'structural realism'. Insofar as realism remains a more or less useful way of interrogating the world order, it is the English

school with its stronger emphasis on the abiding importance of institutionalising shared norms and values in the construction of an 'international society' that has more to offer than the more simplified and ostensibly amoral approach of 'power politics' that so dominates American realist thinking.

Professor Bilgrami's historical defence of the contribution of non-alignment to Indian foreign policy does not preclude a recognition that the world has now changed in ways such as to require new thinking and new orientations on the part of Indian decision-makers. The starting point in such an effort depends on how we understand the nature of the current world order. Different observers give different answers depending on their angle of vision. For some, looking at the USA's relative preponderance, it is uni-polar. For others looking at the distribution of military power, there still remain only two countries capable of destroying each other and the world, providing therefore a continuing bi-polarity. For those looking at economic bloc formations, the world seems tri-polar. Yet again, for some others it is now multi-polar. Finally, for those deeply critical of mainstream thinking, the very conceptualization of the world order in terms of polarities (uni-, bi- or multi-polar) is only of limited value and should not be elevated to the status of being a serious conceptual schema. It distorts more than it illuminates.

The author takes the view that the world order has transited from bi-polarity to a kind of 'uni-multi-polarity'. Today, 'the organising principle of a multi-polar, pluralistic, globally integrated, democratic, decentralised, market force world' has to be based on shared values of freedom, human rights, social and economic justice. Thus, in the author's view, while matters of force (and notions like balance of power) will retain some validity, the future will be dominated more by deepening concerns over matters like global social and economic inequalities, violations of democratic rights and the need to institutionalise checks on the stronger countries more prone to the abusive use of power.

Following the book's central logic, one might anticipate that the author's future preoccupations will centre more on the nature and impact of the rules, practices and institutions of a 'globalizing' world economy. This is the one area that is only lightly touched upon in this otherwise comprehensive and useful work.

Achin Vanaik

**THE CTBT AND THE RISE OF NUCLEAR NATIONALISM IN INDIA: Linkage Between Nuclear Arms Race, Arms Control and Disarmament**  
by T.T. Poulouse. Lancer Books, New Delhi, 1996.

64

THE rise of 'nuclear nationalism' in India is not a new phenomenon. Nuclear nationalism was born in India way back in 1964 when China detonated its first nuclear device. It was but natural. The Chinese Bomb came soon after India

had suffered humiliation at Chinese hands in 1962. We had to fight one and a half wars with Pakistan in 1965. The Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses was established in New Delhi and the first modern strategic thinker of India was born. Most of the columnists, publicists and even academics were in favour of an Indian Bomb.

Those who opposed this position, including the present reviewer, were considered mavericks. The majority view got strength from an off-the-cuff remark by Dr. Homi Bhabha affirming the capability of our nuclear establishment to produce the Bomb within 18 months of a political decision to do so. A majority of the MPs of the ruling Congress party (most of whom had the privilege of having worked with Nehru) seemed to favour India going nuclear. The Bhartiya Jan Sangh did plead for a nuclear bomb, but its voice then was weak. Only the communists, the socialists and the Gandhians in the Congress were against India going nuclear. The public opinion polls conducted in 1966-67 overwhelmingly favoured a nuclear response to the Chinese Bomb – more than 80%. Consequently, India's nuclear policy was changed – though half-heartedly. We did not decide to go in for nuclear weapons. Instead, we decided to keep our nuclear option open – a policy which has continued since then.

This also led to a change in our nuclear arms control policy. Unfortunately this change in policy is characterized by ad-hocism and is not based on a well thought out strategy. The mandarins in the South Bloc prefer to cross the bridge when it comes to them rather than thinking in advance. That creates a dilemma for serious students of arms control and disarmament like Professor Poulouse. In an excellent work under review, he has recapitulated the nuclear doctrines, the strategies and the developments in the field of arms control during the last five decades. He is well-versed with the literature on arms control as reflected in this book, but finds it difficult to explain Indian policy simply because it is not a policy per se, but a body of ad hoc decisions made with the sole objective of keeping our nuclear option open.

According to him, CTBT is 'India's baby' (p. 175) and hence he finds it difficult to explain India's objection to it now. As a matter of fact, nuclear arms control as a concept (though not defined in academic jargon) is India's baby. It was formulated in 1954 when Nehru pleaded for a standstill agreement on test ban and considered it a step-by-step approach towards nuclear disarmament. We supported all the measures which constitute nuclear arms control, viz. nuclear test ban, creation of nuclear weapons free zones, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, etc., till the time we decided to keep our nuclear option open. We were in the forefront at the time of negotiating the Partial Test Ban Treaty and were the first to sign and ratify it in 1963 (after the three depository nations).

Since then we have continued to plead for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty till the time it was no longer a reality.

When we discovered that the CTBT negotiations were nearing fruition, and could affect our policy of keeping the option open (for a meaningful nuclear deterrent, a series of nuclear tests are a must, as maintained by Poulse and most of the scientific community), we decided to oppose it. It is immaterial what riders were invented to rationalize our objections. The best, of course, could have been a linkage between the CTBT and a time-bound nuclear disarmament.

We did the same with regard to the NPT. Till 1964, non-proliferation was synonymous with non-spread, non-dissemination of nuclear weapons, as all the UN General Assembly resolutions between 1958 to 1964 would testify. The semantics of vertical and horizontal proliferation was introduced by us after the Chinese test and we rationalized our opposition to the NPT because nuclear weapon powers would not have agreed to a simultaneous ban on vertical proliferation. Similarly, we supported all the proposals pertaining to the creation of nuclear weapons free zones till 1974, when Pakistan introduced such a proposal with regard to South Asia. Well, the objection was simple – we don't consider South Asia as a region; it is a sub-region!

Professor Poulse provides a summary of the nuclear debate in India, which he rightly points out has been dominated by the Bomb lobby. His critique of the policy of ambivalence is justified. His objection to considering Pakistan's nuclear threat as a rationale for India going nuclear is correct. He considers China as 'our real strategic problem' (p. 224). But his hope of China unilaterally announcing 'its intention to dismantle its MRBM bases in Tibet' which could lead to 'transforming South Asia into a nuclear free area' (pp. 252-53) is utopian. The question of India's nuclear strategy a world of nuclear weapons powers, including in its own neighbourhood, remains unanswered, despite his critique of the Bomb lobby. His publishers have not done justice to the book – there are innumerable printing mistakes. Even the footnotes in chapter 3 are missing. Footnotes in chapter 5 are printed alongside those of chapter 6. But that should not bother those who value hard work with an indepth understanding of the subject.

**Brij Mohan Kaushik**

**LEGACY OF A DIVIDED NATION: India's Muslims since Independence** by Mushirul Hasan. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997.

FEW issues excite as much public passion as discussions about the condition of, role of, and future of, our Muslim community/communities. Fifty years after Partition, we as a people and as a nation still have to come to terms with the 'Muslim question'. Are 'they' like everyone else? Or are they different? How have they been treated? Are they oppressed or have they been politically pampered? Under-

lying all such questions are concerns about our secular protestations – pseudo or otherwise.

It is indeed ironic that notwithstanding the veritable outpouring of literature on Indian secularism/communalism, particularly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, this is a concern marked greatly by prejudice and fear, shallow and flawed understanding, and a parading of half-truths, if not falsehoods. This ignorance about our Muslim co-citizens is most marked among the Hindus, whether or not they see themselves as secular. We know so little about Muslim culture, literature, history, traditions, lifestyles that in our everyday observations we may as well be talking about another race. And this notwithstanding 12 centuries of co-living. If for no other reason, it is important that all of us read Professor Mushirul Hasan's latest offering – a panoramic look at Indian Muslims since Independence. Whether or not we accept his position, at least the discourse will be less marked by ignorance. We also need to admit that each one of us, at least in north India, and probably elsewhere in the country, are deeply implicated in the intensification of the fault-line constructed around the Muslim community.

A word about the author. No one seriously concerned with this question can afford to ignore Mushirul Hasan. Though of late more in the news for the role he was cast in and has been playing in Jamia Millia Islamia, Mushir has for long been an exemplar of the rational, 'secular' Muslim – liberal, tolerant, proud of his culture and identity, and above all refusing to cave in to an exclusivist vision, both within his community and outside. In this he attempts to follow the traditions of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Maulana Azad, Zakir Hussain and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai. Through both his scholarship and public interventions, he has striven to help his community break out of its self-imposed ghettoisation, to put aside the past and work along with others in the making of a more tolerant India.

This work attempts to analyse the current condition of India's polity and its relationship with Muslims. It looks at the origins of Muslim separatism under the British, at the making of Partition, and at the meanings of these for a host of Muslim communities, families and individuals. It examines the establishment of the 'Nehruvian consensus' with its secular vision for India's future, as also its subsequent break-up from the 1960s to the present, focusing in particular on the reasons for the growth of communal activity and the retreat of both Hindus and Muslims into communal, political camps. Finally, it surveys the state of India's Muslims after Ayodhya.

Overall, Mushir remains a firm admirer of Nehru and the early Congress. Not that he is unaware of the many limitations and weaknesses of his 'hero' and his politics. His real ire is against Nehru's successors, who notwithstanding their formal positions, have quite willingly played up to the most obscurantist leaders and tendencies in all camps, in the process vitiating both civil society and compromis-



ing the majesty of the state. Nevertheless, he remains a firm believer in India's secular destiny – even in these difficult times.

How does someone who straddles the uneasy world of both belonging to and standing outside a community look at its collective autobiography? Such it appears is the fate of the liberal, modern, secular Muslim in India. It must be even more difficult for a person who does not subscribe to the idea of the Muslims in India constituting a community. The reference is not just to a variety of internal differentiations that mark any collectivity, no matter what the grid around which the construction is sought to be fashioned. Rather, it is that most Muslims, be it for economic or doctrinal reasons, take their commitment to Islam as only one among other values, that too further differentiated into a number of detailed commitments. Unfortunately, that is not the way the external world sees them, more so in these times when passions run high.

As a Muslim in India, more so if you are articulate and successful, you are constantly on trial. In the circle of the non-communal Hindu you are 'liked' if you are not enough of a Muslim. Yes, we love your food, clothes, *tehjib* and *shairi*. That is only a marker of your culture. But if you also come across as a believer, someone concerned about the fate of your community and its institutions, then you are likely to suddenly become suspect. It is indeed ironic that those of us who rail against the Muslim theological leadership – for being obscurantist, for being insufficiently concerned with the secular needs of the community, for constantly harping on the fate of mosques, the Haj, Urdu, Aligarh Muslim University, personal law and the like, easily grant to them the leadership role of India's Muslims. The very features that make the liberal, secular Muslim acceptable simultaneously become the markers for their weakness. The refrain is that they do not represent anyone. Even worse, many of them are derided for playing up their minority status to secure differential advantages.

The one feature of this book that most struck this reader is not just its scholarship, its formidable accessing of both archival and journalistic material, or even its creative use of fictional and personal accounts. Instead, it is the author's attempt to squarely pose the dilemmas of the liberal, modern Muslim. At one level there is a need to not be marked out as different, to be treated like everyone else, for it to be recognised that Indian Muslims share concerns with all citizens. At another are the specificities of being an Indian Muslim – a continuing (often unjustified) pride about the community's past as rulers; tremendous insecurity about the present; and above all living with a guilt falsely loaded onto an entire people. Whether we admit it or not, most of us continue to blame the Muslims for Partition, and worse, of constituting (self-consciously or otherwise) a bloc in Indian politics. All this makes the experience of being a Muslim in India different from others, definitely a Hindu. As Shahid Amin constantly points out, even your best friends

expect you to know Urdu, probably wear a Fèz cap, sport a beard minus moustache, and if a male, have more than one wife.

But any effort to read this book as just another 'defence' of Indian Muslims, of 'official' secularism, or of wanting to retain a permanent framework of majority and minority would be unfair. For Mushir even the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya and the subsequent riots represents not just a dark chapter, a blot on the Indian landscape that can be corrected only by rebuilding the mosque on the same site. His effort is to outline how the community can and is using this traumatic episode to introspect and fashion a new role for itself. More significantly, Mushir argues that this is not exclusively a Muslim affair, but one in which thinking Muslims are seeking out allies and compatriots. How this battle will turn out is crucial for the future of our polity.

Steering through these difficult and contradictory waters is not easy, more so when the canvas is as broad as the one attempted by Mushirul Hasan. Many of his assessments of events, situations and personalities are likely to be challenged by scholars more conversant with the terrain than this commentator. In fact, one hopes that they will join the debate. To me, as a non-specialist reader, it appears that this analysis can be faulted for deploying a differential criteria of assessment for Muslims and others. It is far too generous with Nehru and insufficiently appreciative of the concerns of leaders lumped together as right-wing Hindus. Patel is an obvious example, a favourite whipping boy of our secularists. I wish that Mushirul Hasan had at least referred to Rajmohan Gandhi's biography of our first Home Minister. It really does not behove him to accuse Patel, in the wake of the Partition, of threatening to use Indian Muslims as hostage in the battles against Pakistan. Similarly, why should fighting for Hindi be any different from trying to secure a better status for Urdu? Or setting up the BHU be seen in 'communal' colours, when the AMU is characterized as an effort to broaden and modernize the educational concerns of our Muslim communities.

One wishes that Mushirul Hasan had spent greater effort in trying to analyse the weakness of the modernist impulse in our Muslim communities. Just blaming colonial masters, right-wing Hindus and an 'obscurantist' Muslim theological leadership does not sufficiently explain our fractured and worsening inter-community relations. The tendency within the liberal Muslims to either eschew larger social and political concerns or to seek favours from the state has contributed greatly to the charges of pseudo-secularism. Given the author's personal experience in the battles over Jamia Millia Islamia, he could have enlightened us more about the role of the different actors. That, at least, could have laid bare the process through which Muslims and others are constructed in our society.

Harsh Sethi

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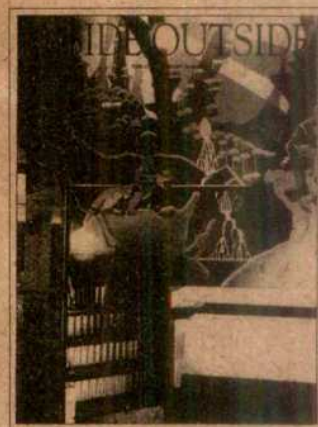
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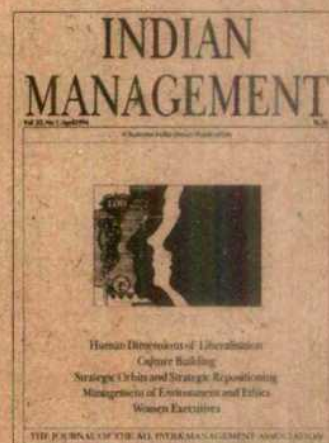
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# Comment

## Gunshots and silence

ON 31 March 1997, Chandrashekhar Prasad and Shyam Narayan Yadav, two leaders belonging to the CPI-ML (Liberation) party were gunned down in broad daylight in the town of Siwan, the urban centre of the recently created district of Siwan in north-west Bihar. A local bystander, Bhuteli Mian, was also inadvertently killed and three others wounded in this assault by an armed gang. Such killings are by no means uncommon in Bihar or elsewhere in India. Undoubtedly, what made this particular assault into a major issue and public rallying point were the repercussions it had, and the series of events that followed in Delhi and later in Patna.

Chandrashekhar Prasad had only recently returned from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to Siwan to become a full-time activist for the CPI-ML (Liberation). In his years as a post-graduate student in JNU (Centre for Political Studies), he had left an indelible mark on the life of the university. He had been president of the JNU Students Union (JNUSU) for two terms and was widely respected and liked by the students, teachers and karamcharis, as much for his human qualities as for his political dedication and activity. His death deeply shocked the JNU community as well as other institutions, groups and individuals in Delhi who were acquainted with him and his role in the student and political life of the capital city.

JNU students, teachers and karamcharis took the lead in arousing wider public concern over these political murders, reflecting as they did, wider issues of violation of democratic rights and of growing criminalisation of political life in Bihar and the country as a whole.

It is in this context that a fact-finding team was set up. The team comprised the following members: Professor Ashwini Ray (Centre for Political Studies, JNU and member of JNU Teacher's Association), Achin Vanaik (Visiting Professor, Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia University), Smitu Kothari (Lokayan), Mehdi Arslan (Insaf), Premila Lewis (social activist, writer). The team was constituted as an independent group of concerned citizens with no collective allegiance to any body or bodies, be these political or otherwise.

There is little doubt that if the victims had not included someone like Chandrashekhar Prasad, who was connected

with a prestigious institution like JNU, it is unlikely that such a furore would have been created. But it would also be a serious error to believe that the agitation that subsequently emerged, or that this report, are motivated solely by concern for the tragedy that befell Chandrashekhar. Wider issues are at stake which have motivated this investigation and report.

The drama of the assassination of someone like Chandrashekhar also served as a trigger to unleash long accumulated public frustrations about the general deterioration in our democratic system. His death and that of his associate Shyam Narayan Yadav (and of the unfortunate Bhuteli Mian) became a symbol of general public anger and concern over the steadily increasing violation of basic human rights that has been associated with the growing intrusion of crime into politics. Numerous innocents have had to pay with their lives and their livelihood in a period which has witnessed the breakdown (and, often, an absence) of a democratic process, in Bihar in particular and in the country in general.

This general and wider concern is reflected in the report. Besides focusing on the specific injustice done to the three victims and their families, the report attempts to focus on the broader problem of land relations, structural injustice and criminalisation of politics in Bihar (as an example of what is happening in the country as a whole) and on what Indian citizens are to do if we are to reverse this steadily worsening situation. The team believes, therefore, that there are different dimensions of the problem and various levels of responsibility associated with these dimensions both with respect to the general problem and even with respect to the specific crime under investigation in Siwan.

Within limitations, this report has sought to highlight these various dimensions and levels of responsibility. Thus the report is not restricted to the events on 31 March in Siwan. To understand that event we have to understand much more than just that event. To try and rectify that particular injustice we have to try and rectify more than just that injustice.

Bihar has a long history of land struggles. A majority of the people experience material deprivation. Their long history of subjugation and discrimination and their growing aspirations, restlessness and assertiveness in the face of

\* Summary of the Report of a Fact-Finding Mission.

upper caste groups unwilling to relinquish their power and privilege, help to some extent, explain the growth of political violence in Bihar.

More recently, these struggles have been led by various factions of the CPI-ML. These struggles have brought in their wake brutal counter-offensives by the upper castes and the state. Attacks on the struggling landless and the marginal farmers by private armies of the landlords are frequent. What is new in the situation is that the contradictions that have emerged in the two decades or so have pitchforked the new ruling alliance consisting mainly of Yadavs and Muslims, the M-Y factor (apart from sections of other backward castes), into the centre of the land struggles. As we noted earlier, both these dominant sections of the ruling alliance are differentiated in terms of the landholding structure and other factors which determine their economic status. Of late, the lower sections have shown a tendency not only to detach themselves from the ruling alliance but also a strong inclination to align with the more militant forms of struggle for land, and therefore with the various factions of the CPI-ML, along with sizeable sections of dalits. The largest of these CPI-ML factions is the CPI-ML (Liberation) led by Vinod Mishra – the only faction which considers the electoral arena a legitimate platform to conduct its revolutionary struggle. This political shift has been accompanied by a renunciation of the policy of 'annihilation of the class enemy', though the party continues to maintain armed people's self-defence squads.

It is in this sense that the new ruling class finds itself squeezed between the more aggressive and oppressive Bhumihar and Rajput landlords, on the one hand, and the social and political assertion by the landless and the marginal farmers of their democratic rights, on the other. The scenario that emerges in Bihar is that of the state government providing tactical, if not strategic support to sustain a significant proportion of the traditional rights of the landed gentry and at the same time propagating itself as the defender of 'social justice'. Numerous incidents from the massacres at Bathani Tola to the gruesome killings of women and children by the Ranbir Sena in Ekwari graphically demonstrate that not only is the state a relatively silent spectator to the massacre of the landless people, it actively aids and abets these killings. This is reflected in the statement of Laloo Prasad Yadav at a public meeting in Bhojpur in 1995, where he remarked that, *Muale ko Bhojpur se ukharne ke liye mai narak ki takaton se samjhota karne ke liye taiyar hoon* (In order to uproot CPI-ML from Bhojpur, I am ready to compromise with the forces of hell). Despite the growing attacks by the private armies of the landlords, and the complicity of the state in this, the various factions of the CPI-ML have managed to extend their base into new areas of Bihar.

The general atmosphere of violence and brutalisation of the politics of Bihar is compounded by a general break-

down of democratic process and of democratic norms. For example, for almost two decades, no panchayat elections have been held, nor elections to college or university bodies, including to student/teachers' unions, and there is little popular resentment around it. College and university teachers have not been paid their salaries for months (some payments have been made after popular protest).

Interestingly, this may also suggest that they have alternative sources of income. But what is of deeper concern is the growth of a generalised culture of violence and the emergence of organised criminal gangs. In Siwan, for instance, small arguments often degenerate into beatings and occasional gunfights. In fact, there seems to be steady supply of arms, like AK-47s and Mauser pistols in all of Bihar including Siwan, and which are often used to settle even petty personal squabbles.

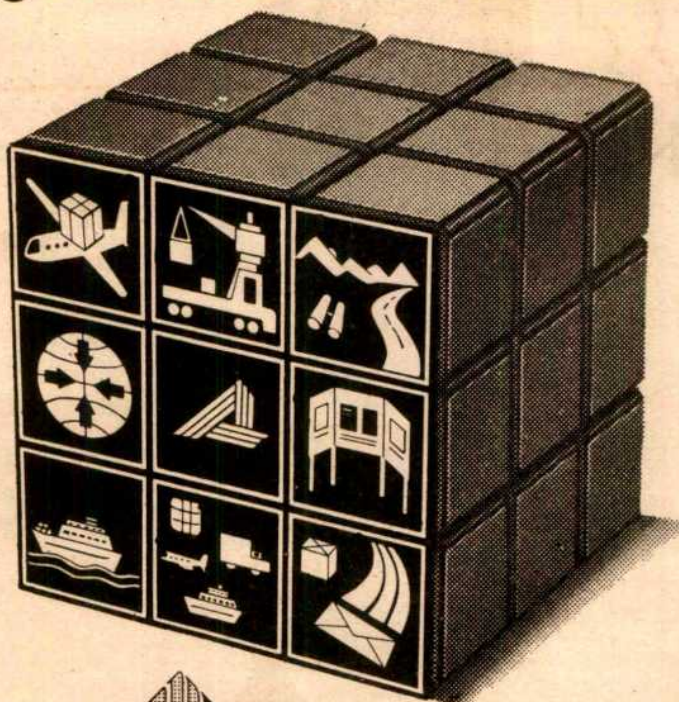
The general level of violence in a region like Siwan with substantial Muslim presence, when combined with the operations of criminal gangs which enjoy political protection and patronage (it is alleged that Mohd. Shahabuddin, sitting MP from Siwan who is currently in jail patronises a major gang) gives rise to a fear of communal violence. Till now the region has been relatively insulated from this malaise as claimed by Laloo Yadav, but at the cost of large scale criminal violence. But were Shahabuddin's dominance to be threatened, he is capable of engineering a communal riot; so can the BJP, to isolate Shahabuddin and weaken the Janata Dal.

Siwan is a microcosm of the rise of crime based politics in Bihar. Not only has there been a general criminalisation of politics, what the Shahabuddin phenomenon represents – including the political protection that he receives from the highest in the land, particularly the Chief Minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav – is the politicisation of crime. This reality also reflects the degeneration that has taken place in democratic politics where it has become almost necessary for anyone who comes into politics to master the means of accumulation and extortion. That the CPI-ML (Liberation) represented a comparatively different trend (where even if 'taxes' and contributions are sought, they are primarily for the struggle of hitherto discriminated and marginalised communities) is another major factor defining the primary political rivalry in the area and the systematic attempts by Shahabuddin and the Janata Dal to eliminate the ML's political significance.

Despite differences which have cropped up both in Patna and Delhi between different political parties and rival student unions on questions of leadership, tactics of mobilisation and direction of the movement, and between students and their teachers on the need to restore some normality in academic institutions, there remains a common underlying empathy with the cause which some hope can take on the dimensions of a larger JP-type movement against the criminalisation of politics in Siwan, Bihar and India.



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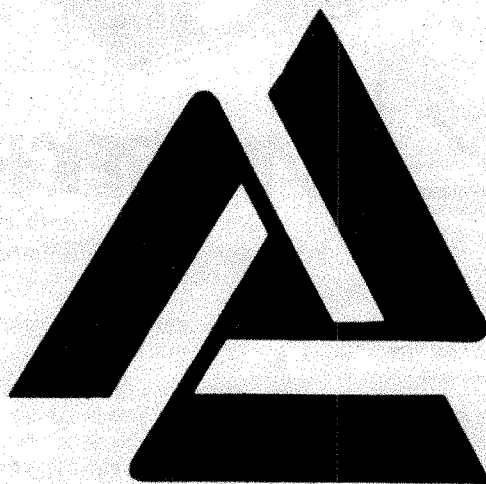
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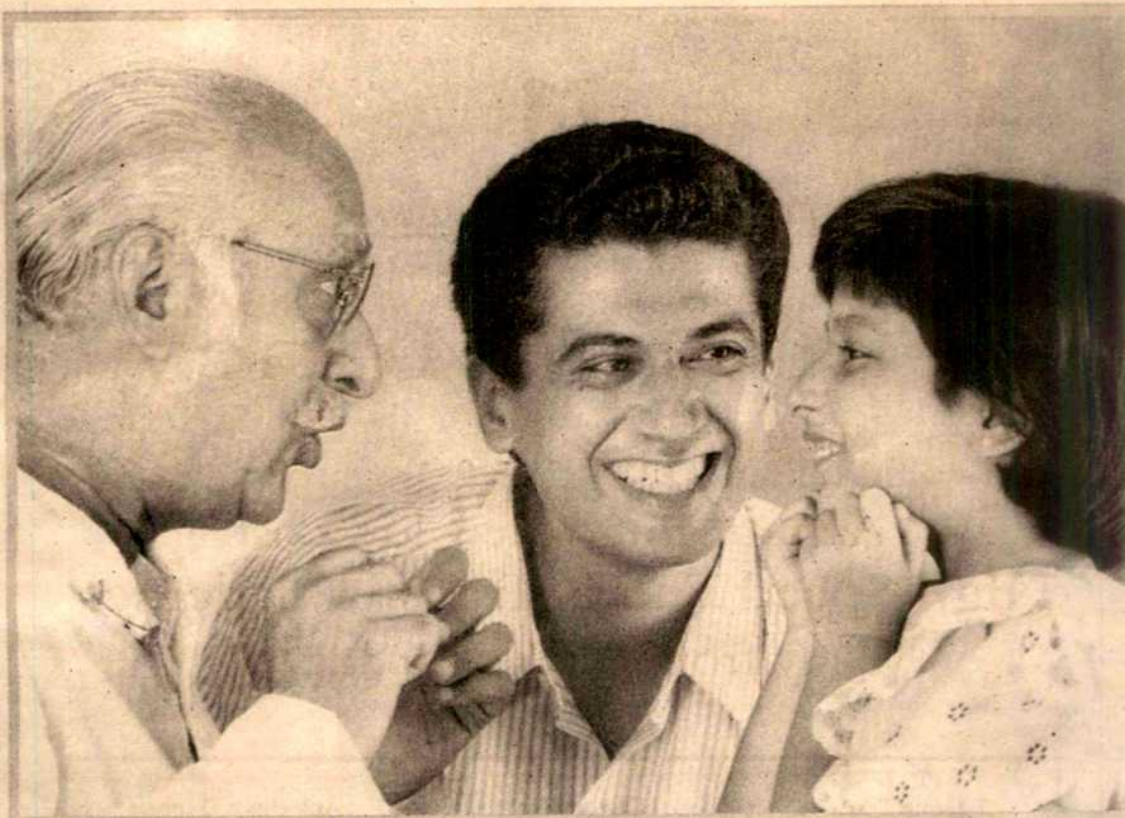
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